

The Protector

TheRealThing

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

Padme Amidala has survived, and has spent the past five years with her twins in hiding from the Emperor. She believes Anakin died on Mustafar, but soon learns the truth.

Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER ONE

Darth Vader stood in brooding silence doing his best to master his impatience. Around him the festivities carried on, as the Imperial elite from across the galaxy celebrated another glorious year of the Galactic Empire. Vader hated parties, hated the obsequiousness of the socially well connected. He made a point of being as curt as possible to anyone who dared speak to him, and soon he was left to himself, which was his goal all along. He was far more comfortable on the periphery, watching rather than participating, for it afforded him the chance to think without being constantly bombarded by the inane babble of the people he was forced to endure.

Vader looked over the crowd, watching with decided disinterest at the extravagantly dressed delegates. He stopped when his eyes rested upon Queen Kylantha of Naboo. Unlike her predecessor, Queen Apailana, Kylantha was loyal to the Empire, at least outwardly. Vader was aware of the changes Kylantha had made to the planet Naboo's democratic government, changes that smacked of sympathy to the fledgling Rebel Alliance. *She will be dealt with in good time*, he pondered. Naboo was not a planet he wanted to ever visit again, the very thought of it brought back too many painful memories. It had been almost five years since the death of his wife, who had once been the queen of Naboo herself, Padmé Amidala. *His angel*.

Vader pushed the memory of her face from his mind and looked away, not giving in to his weakness for her. *She is gone, and nothing can bring her back. I must move on, I must put the past behind me.*

"Lord Vader, the Emperor is requesting your presence."

Vader looked down at the Imperial flunkie and nodded his understanding, moving away from his vantage point to seek out his master.

On the other side of the galaxy...

"Happy Birthday, Luke and Leia, Happy Birthday to you!!"

"I get to wish first," Leia announced. "You wished first last year."

"Did not!" Luke protested. "You did! You *always* do!"

"I did not!! Mom, Luke is being bossy again!"

Padmé Amidala exchanged a look with Dormé, who simply shook her head with a smile.

"Now children, this is a special day," Padmé told them. "Your birthday. Let's not ruin it with squabbling, okay? Make a wish at the same time, that way no one has to go second."

Leia looked at Luke and almost stuck her tongue out at him, but thought better of it. They both closed their eyes and concentrated for a moment, and then, as though in silent

communication, opened their eyes and blew out all 5 candles, amid the applause of the small gathering who sat around the table with them. Around them sat their mother, her friend Dormé, the household droids, C3P0 and R2D2, as well as Obi-Wan Kenobi, who had been a friend of their father's when he was still alive.

The birthday celebration, like every previous one, was a subdued affair, celebrated in the privacy of their family's secluded home deep in the forested region of the Outer Rim planet, Hannas II. Neither Luke nor Leia knew any different, for they had been here all their lives, or at least as long as they could recall. Padmé was grateful that infants were incapable of retaining memories, for the memory of the day they were born was something less than joyous. Padmé rarely spoke of that day, to them or to anyone for that matter; for her it was too painful, and too much a reminder of all that she had lost on that terrible day on the planet Mustafar.

Five years ago today, she thought as she watched her children dig into their cake and ice cream. *Five years since I lost him.*

Obi-Wan Kenobi had also reflected on that day many times over the past five years. He bore a measure of guilt over what had befallen his best friend and former padawan that day. He had sworn on that day that he would do all that he could to protect the children of his dear friend as well as his wife from the reach of the evil emperor and his henchman, Vader.

For five years Padmé had lived in seclusion with Anakin's children, having faked her death on the day they were born, leaving the galaxy to mourn both her and her unborn child. She had told Obi-Wan on that day, moments after the children were born, that she still believed that there was good in Anakin; Obi-Wan refused to believe it. Everything that was good in Anakin died on Mustafar on that dreadful day, leaving behind only darkness. *He will never find this family*, Kenobi had vowed. *Not if I have to give my own life to protect them.*

Part of Kenobi felt guilty for lying to Padmé about the demise of Anakin; yet, in every way that mattered, Anakin Skywalker was dead. All that was good in Anakin Skywalker was destroyed in the fires of Mustafar. Darth Vader was more machine than man, twisted, evil and ruthless. No, Obi-Wan reflected. *He will never know they are alive, not so long as I live.*

Padmé had finally settled the twins down to sleep, and went outside onto the large veranda behind the house to admire the clear night sky. The twins' birthday was always bittersweet for her; it marked the beginning of a new life with her precious children, and the end of her life with the only man who had ever captured her heart, her Ani. Padmé had vowed not to allow the agonizing memories of that day mar her children's birthday, and had done so valiantly until now, when they were asleep, and the brilliant stars above reminded her of so many night she had spent waiting for him to arrive home from the War. And when he had arrived... the passion, the longing that finally could be fulfilled was almost too much to bear. The bond between them had been forged in the deepest love, and had seemed unbreakable. *Until Palpatine drove us apart...* the thought of the former chancellor, her one time friend, filled Padmé with quiet rage. Her life since the death of her husband had been one living in fear of discovery, in fear of Palpatine, whom she hated with all of her being. She knew that if he ever found her and her children, they would all be destroyed. *Just as their father had been. He will never find us...without Anakin, he has no way of finding us.*

Padmé closed her eyes, trying with all her might to put the image of Anakin's face as he turned on her out of her mind, his beautiful face, twisted with insane rage and jealousy. *What happened to the pure hearted little boy I once loved? What happened to my soul mate? How could it all have gone so wrong??*

"Padmé? Are you alright?"

Padmé turned to see Obi-Wan standing there, a concerned look on his face.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm just thinking about...well, you know what I'm thinking about," she said, turning away again.

Obi-Wan nodded. He could not understand how Padmé could think of Anakin with anything less than resentment now, not after what he had done to her on Mustafar. Yet, he never truly understood the bond that they shared; a bond that Anakin threw away when he chose the Dark Side over the woman he loved.

"Yes, I know," Obi-Wan replied at last. "It's been five years, Padmé. Time to put the past behind you. Anakin is dead; he died before he ever reached Mustafar. Surely you realize that."

Padmé turned back to Kenobi, anger flitting across her face. "Don't patronize me, Obi-Wan," she retorted. "I know what happened to Anakin. You don't need to remind me."

With that she turned away and walked into the house, leaving Kenobi alone, shaking his head in wonder at the irrational nature of the female heart.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

"So, tell me," she says. "What's on your mind? Or should I ask?"

I look up at the clouds moving across the sky above us, not wanting to put a damper on the perfect day we're sharing. "You don't want to know," I say at last.

She frowns. "The war?" she asks.

I nod. "Yeah," I tell her. "I know I shouldn't be thinking about it, but it's only a matter of time before..."

She leans down and puts a finger over my lips. "Don't say it," she tells me. "I know what you're going to say, Ani, and I don't want to hear it."

I look up at her, sensing that the same thoughts have plagued her mind as well. I reach up and take her hand and kiss the tip of her finger. "Okay," I tell her. "I won't say it."

She smiles. "Good," she replies. "Let's just enjoy this time we have, Ani. I don't remember ever being so completely happy in my life, do you know that?"

I smile as I kiss the palm of her hand. "I know I've never been so happy," I tell her. "I wish I could just make time stand still and stay with you here forever."

Padmé nods and I can see her eyes grow moist.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I didn't meant to make you cry, Padmé."

She shakes her head, brushing an errant tear away from her cheek impatiently. "You didn't," she replies softly. "I'm just too emotional sometimes. I just love you so much, Ani... the thought of being apart from you..."

"Shhh," I tell her, 'don't think of it, Padmé. I'm here, right now we're together,' I say, pulling her down on top of me. "And that's all that matters."

She looks down at me, her hands framing my face as she runs her fingers through my hair. "Do you remember us lying like this on this very hill only last week, Ani?" she asks with a smile.

"Yes," I reply. "Seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it?"

She nods. "I can't tell you how difficult it was for me to walk away from you that afternoon," she admits. "I was such a fool to deny what I felt for you."

"No, not a fool, Padmé," I reply. "You were just concerned about the future, that's not foolish."

"Maybe not," she says. "But to consider a future without you now is beyond my ability."

I smile. "Mine too," I reply. "Good thing old Paolo is out of the picture for good," I tease her.

She laughs. "Are you still on that??" she says. 'Paolo was never in the picture, my dear husband,' she replies. "So you never had anything to worry about."

"That's good to know," I reply, pulling her down so I can kiss that delectable mouth of hers.

I run my fingers through her hair, savoring the delicious mouth that drives me so wild.

"Ani, maybe we shouldn't let things get out of hand," she says suddenly, pulling up.

I frown. "Why not?" I ask.

"Because it's going to rain," she said, looking up at the sky. "We don't want to get caught out here."

"Nah, it's not going to rain," I tell her, ignoring the way the clouds have darkened. "It's just clouds."

"Ani, I can smell the rain coming," she tells me. "Trust me."

"Smell the rain?" I laugh. "You can smell rain?? How is that possible?"

She smiles. "You wouldn't understand, being from a desert planet," she replies. 'But the air has a certain smell to it when it's about to rain,' she explains. "And I can smell that right now."

"All I can smell is you," I say, nuzzling the side of her neck. "And it's driving me wild."

Padmé laughs. "You are so bad," she says. "What am I going to do with you?"

I look up at her with a devilish grin. "I can think of a few things," I tell her. "Do you need a suggestion?"

She laughs again and simply gives in to the moment unfolding between us and kisses me once again.

*Vader forced himself to wake up, shattering the memory from an impossibly beautiful moment so long ago. He sat up, pressing his hands to his forehead as though trying to squeeze every last memory of that life from his mind. *She is gone, don't you get it?? She is gone, and you killed her. You have no right to those memories; you forfeited all rights to them when you killed her along with your unborn child.**

Vader activated the devise that returned the mask to his face, and lowered his helmet back onto his head. There would be no more sleep tonight; even the few hours he'd had was a rarity anymore. The little sleep he did have been riddled with images of Her, memories of the past, poignant and passionate moments that they had shared before he had thrown it all away, the scent and feel of her skin as clear in his mind as though it had been just yesterday that they had been together.

*Leaving his hyperbaric chamber, Vader paced about in his chambers, his mind troubled. *Why am I plagued with dreams about her? Why is her image forever in my mind?* If he didn't know better, he would think that there was a reason for this, that somehow she was trying to*

communicate with him through his subconscious mind; but that wasn't possible. She was gone, and even were she alive, she'd not want anything to do with him. Not after Mustafar. Not after the way he'd turned on her....

Deciding upon the best way to keep his mind off of the images his dream had conjured up; Vader left his chambers, and headed for the bridge.

Obi-Wan resided in a small cottage not far from the home where Padmé and her children lived. He had taken it upon himself to watch over the family of his old friend, to protect them at all costs from Vader and his emperor. Of course, Padmé did not completely understand Obi-Wan's insistence that her life was in danger; if Anakin was dead, then what possible threat could she pose to Palpatine? Besides, that, the galaxy believed she was dead. What reason would Palpatine have for believing otherwise? He had managed to convince her that Palpatine could still find her and subsequently the children if she were not careful, and this was enough to keep Padmé on her guard.

Kenobi wasn't foolish enough to think that he could keep the secret forever; there would come a day when the twins would grow up, and if they continued to manifest the same abilities that they had thus far in their lives, it would only be a matter of time before Vader would sense their Force presence and seek them out. *I shall cross that bridge when I get to it*, Kenobi had decided. *For now, it is for her own good that she believes him to be dead.*

Obi-Wan started each morning the same way: meditation, a light, nutritious breakfast, and then to his computer where he would scan the Imperial holonet, check for any messages (there rarely were any since he too was technically in hiding) and then a rigorous work out to keep in fighting form. He considered himself to be the personal body guard of the Skywalker family, and as such, needed to be ready for anything should the unthinkable happen.

To his surprise, there was a message waiting for him this morning. Curious, he sat in front of the comm. screen, a hot cup of caff in his hand, and activated the message. As he listened, he felt the warmth drain from his body. *Oh no... this cannot be... how did he find her??*

The message was from the administrator of the Polis Massa medical facility. Padmé had been brought to this same facility 5 years earlier after being attacked on Mustafar by Darth Vader, and had given birth to his children there. Kenobi, Yoda and Bail Organa had made certain that the droids working in the facility had had their memories erased, so that the record of Padmé's stay there would not be available to anyone who might be trying to find her. *But there were more than droids working on that facility... and their memories had not been erased, their memories had been ripped from their minds by an agent of the emperor obsessed with finding the wife of his henchman. And now he knew that she lived, he would begin the search; now her life was truly in danger.*

Kenobi sat at the computer screen as this information sank in, and the implications of it soon followed. *Padmé and the children are no longer safe. Somehow I have to convince her of this... but how do I do so without telling her the truth?* Obi-Wan felt sickened by the realization of what he needed to do hit him. *I have to tell her about Darth Vader — somehow I must tell Padmé that the man she loved is an inhuman monster now... and that I have been lying to her for five years. Which is worse?? Which one will cause her more pain? And which one will she hate me for more??*

Obi-Wan finally stood up, knowing that he had no time to lose. He needed to tell Padmé what he had just learned: tell her that Palpatine knew she was alive, and why this was suddenly such a threat to her. *He will find her through Vader, her and Vader's children.* Kenobi felt anxious at the thought of the conversation that faced him, but he left his cottage nonetheless, knowing that he had no choice in the matter. The safety of Padmé and her children depended upon it.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

Padmé sat on the sandy beach enjoying the bright morning sunshine. In the lake before her, Luke and Leia splashed about, laughing and enjoying the warm summer day. Both of the twins had become excellent swimmers, taking after their mother in their love of the water. Padmé thought wistfully back to the idyllic time she had spent on Naboo with Anakin, and how reluctantly he had agreed to swim out to the island with her. But he had done it, despite his misgivings. She remembered making love on the beach of that small island a few days after they were married, not a care in the world save for one another, madly and deeply in love, existing only for the other...

"Mommy, look at what I can do!"

Padmé shook herself from her painful recollections to watch as Leia demonstrated her newest skill, the backstroke.

"Excellent, Leia!" she called out to her daughter with a smile. "You've learned that very quickly."

"I can do it too!" shouted Luke, not to be out done by his twin. Padmé smiled as she watched her son perform the backstroke with equal skill.

"Fantastic!" she called out to him. "Ten more minutes kids!"

"Okay!"

Obi-Wan stood on the beach watching the children swimming, a sinking feeling deep within him as he thought about what he needed to do. The thought of Darth Vader learning of the existence of those two precious children made Kenobi angry, and he vowed that he would never allow him near Luke and Leia, even if he needed to take on the Sith Lord himself.

"Good morning," he said as he came up behind Padmé, trying his best to sound chipper.

Padmé turned around, startled by the sound of his voice. "Good morning," she replied. "You're here awfully early today," she added.

Kenobi simply nodded as he returned his gaze to the children on the lake. "They are fine swimmers," he commented.

"Yes, they are," Padmé replied, watching them again.

"Padmé, I must speak to you about something," Kenobi said without preamble. "I'm afraid it's quite urgent."

Padmé turned and looked at him, shielding her eyes with her hand so that she could see his face clearly. "What is it?" she asked. "You look pretty rattled."

Kenobi sighed. "It's not good," he said simply. "I'm sorry, Padmé, but something terrible has happened."

Padmé frowned. “What?” she asked simply, fear starting to blossom within her.

“I’m afraid Palpatine has learned that you survived Mustafar,” he said.

“So?” she said, turning back to her children. ‘I don’t pose any threat to him,’ she added. “What would he want with me? Besides, what makes you think he hasn’t known all along?”

She isn’t going to make this easy, Kenobi realized. “I’m afraid there’s more to it, Padmé. Much more. Can we go inside and talk? I’m afraid this cannot wait.”

Padmé turned back and looked at him. She had known Obi-Wan a long time, and had never seen him so agitated. Whatever it was he needed to tell her, it must truly be serious.

“Very well,” she said, standing up. ‘Dormé, keep an eye on the children,’ she said to the young woman seated with her. “And bring them inside for breakfast in another 10 minutes or so.”

“Yes, milady,” Dormé replied.

Padmé brushed the sand from her pants as she walked over to Obi-Wan. “What is going on?” she asked. “You’re starting to scare me.”

Good, he thought, *that’s exactly the way I need you to feel.*

“Come inside, and I’ll tell you everything,” he replied.

Padmé followed Obi-Wan up to the house, her heart pounding harder with every step. Obi-Wan said nothing until they reached the large sitting room on the main floor of the house. Padmé sat down on one of the sofas as Obi-Wan walked over to the large picture window and gazed out at the lake below. *Where do I begin?* He thought. *How do I tell you this??*

“I’m waiting,” Padmé said at last. ‘You can start by explaining why all of a sudden Palpatine is such a threat to me. The way I see it, the only reason I was ever a threat to him was because of Anakin, because he loved me. But Anakin is gone. I don’t represent any threat to him, Obi-Wan.’ She stopped as a horrible thought struck her. “Unless... oh gods, Obi-Wan,” she said, standing up slowly. “He found out about the twins! He knows about Luke and Leia!!”

Obi-Wan turned around quickly. “No, no Padmé, that isn’t it,” he reassured her. “Bail Organa and I made sure we planted some false information in the record banks there. According to the data banks, twin babies born on that day died at birth.”

Padmé relaxed at once, relieved beyond measure to hear of Kenobi and Organa’s foresight. So what was this all about then?

“Then I’m afraid I don’t understand why you’re so worried,” she said. “If he thinks the twins died, then why do you think...”

“It’s because of Vader,” Obi-Wan said at last. “Darth Vader.”

Padmé frowned. “Darth Vader?? What has he to do with me?”

Obi-Wan sighed. *How do I tell you the truth, Padmé? How do I tell you that the man you loved is now the monster known as Darth Vader??*

“Padmé, there’s something you need to know,” Obi-Wan said, walking over to her. “Please, sit down.”

Padmé sat down on the edge of the sofa, her alarm rising again. “What?” she asked simply.

Obi-Wan sat down beside her, turning his body to face hers. “Padmé, what do you remember about that day on Mustafar?”

His question took her by surprise. That was a day she did not think about if she could help it. Why was he asking about it now, after five years??

“I remember everything about that day,” she replied at last. “Everything.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “You remember what happened when Anakin and I fought? How our duel ended?”

Padmé frowned. “You mean when you killed him? Yes, of course I remember,” she replied. “Why are you dredging all that up now??”

“He didn’t die, Padmé,” Obi-Wan said, looking her straight in the eyes. “Anakin did not die that day. In fact, he lives still.”

Padmé sat as though she were a statue. She felt as though the air had been knocked clean out of her. *No, I didn’t hear him correctly... I’ve misunderstood.*

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. “I cannot have heard you properly. It sounded to me as though you said that Anakin was alive.”

“I did,” he said. “Anakin did not die. He was terribly injured, and probably very nearly did die; but he did not. Palpatine found him after we had left the planet, he found him and took him to a medical facility and...”

“And???” Padmé cried. “And? Where is he??”

“Padmé, please,” Obi-Wan said gently, taking her hand. “I know this is a shock, but please hear me out. There is no easy way to tell you this, so I’ll just put it plainly. Padmé, Darth Vader is Anakin. The only way he could survive the injuries he sustained on Mustafar was to be fitted with the breathing apparatus he wears, the mask is a part of that. His arms and legs...”

But Padmé was no longer listening, her mind having shut out his voice. *That monster... that...inhuman cyborg was Anakin... my sweet, beautiful Ani...*

Padmé stood up and walked over to the picture window where she saw Dormé below wrapping large towels around each of the twins. She felt numb, as though she were walking in a dream. *Anakin is alive... but is there any part of Anakin left in him?*

“Why didn’t you tell me this years ago?” She said without looking at him. “Why did you lie to me?”

Obi-Wan did not like the tone of calm detachment in her voice. He knew her well enough after all these years to know that such a tone meant her anger was monumental.

“Do you really have to ask me that?” Obi-Wan asked. “The man you know, the man you loved is dead, Padmé. Darth Vader is more machine than man, twisted and evil. Don’t think

for a moment that if he knew that you and the twins were alive that he wouldn't do everything in his power to find you and destroy you??"

Padmé whirled on him, her dark eyes full of rage. "Don't you dare try to justify what you have done!" she cried. "You have let me live the past five years mourning him, and it was all a lie!"

"No it wasn't," Obi-Wan countered, standing up to face her. 'The man you love, Anakin Skywalker, is dead,' he insisted. "He died when he chose the Dark Side, when he slaughtered the innocent younglings at the Jedi Temple, when he tried to kill you! Have you forgotten what he did to you, Padmé?? How he turned on you and tried to choke you to death??"

"Of course I haven't forgotten," she snapped. "But..."

"Don't you see?" Kenobi interjected. 'Palpatine will find you and the twins through Vader,' he said. "Before too much longer, Vader will sense the existence of his children. Their Force signature will be impossible to hide soon, and he will know that they are alive, and will find them. Is that what you want, Padmé?"

"How can you be so sure that is what he would do?" she retorted "There is still good in him, Obi-Wan. I know you don't believe it, but I do. Even though he did all those horrible things, there is still a shred of Anakin Skywalker in him, and so long as there is, I can't give up on him."

"I don't like the sound of this, Padmé," Kenobi responded. "What are you saying?? What misguided notions have you got in your mind?"

"The only misguidance has been your doing, Obi-Wan," she replied. "Anakin would never harm his children, and would do everything he could to protect his family. He would never allow Palpatine to hurt any of us."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "You are wrong, Padmé," he said. "You cannot believe for a moment that Vader would hesitate to do to Luke and Leia what Palpatine did to their father. That is why we need to take measures to make sure that never happens. I know you won't like it, but I think perhaps it would be prudent if the twins were split up and..."

"Are you insane??" she cried. "Split up my children?? I suppose next you are going to suggest they be split from me as well!"

Obi— Wan hated to tell her so, but that is exactly what he thought. In fact, that was what he had wanted to do when the twins were born, but she wouldn't hear of it. Now after five years, how would he possibly be able to convince her that this was the most prudent course of action?

"Padmé, you have to think of the twins," he began.

"Stop right there," she replied hotly. "You've meddled in our lives enough, Obi-Wan. I am fully capable of taking care of myself and my children without your guidance or your help."

"Padmé, please don't be this way," Obi-Wan pleaded. "I'm begging you! Don't let your love for Anakin cloud your judgment! He will not return it; he is no longer capable of it!"

"Enough!!" she cried. "I don't want to hear any more!! Leave my home, Obi-Wan. Leave me and my children alone. You are not going to interfere in our lives anymore."

Obi-Wan frowned, hurt by her words. She had every right to be angry, however; but this was beyond what even he had anticipated. *Give her a day to cool off*, he reasoned. *She is thinking irrationally right now. Give her a day or two and she'll begin to see reason.*

"I'm so sorry, Padmé," he said at last. "Please know that everything I have done has been out of love for you and your children. I have always had your best interest at heart."

"That may be," she conceded. "But you have gone too far, Obi-Wan. Surely you can see that."

Obi-Wan did not reply, but merely left her and walked out of the room.

"Uncle Obi-Wan!" the twins chorused as they entered the house.

Obi-Wan forced himself to smile and opened his arms to the twins.

"Hello Luke, hello Leia," he said. "Did you have a nice swim?"

"Yes, we can do the backstroke," Luke replied. "Can you come over and swim with us later?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I'm afraid I can't today, Luke," he replied. "Perhaps another time, okay?"

Luke nodded, disappointed. "Okay," he said.

"Are you staying for breakfast, Master Kenobi?" Dormé asked.

"No, thank you Dormé," he replied. "I cannot today."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she replied. "Perhaps another day."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Absolutely."

Dormé directed the twins towards the stairs to get them changed for breakfast. Obi-Wan watched the two young Skywalkers ascend the stairs, his heart heavy. *I won't let you destroy those beautiful children*, he vowed. *Not while I have breath in my body— you won't win, Vader. You won't steal them from her too.*

Chapter 4

Padmé stood staring out the window for what seemed like an eternity, her heart and mind in equal torment. *Anakin is alive...* No, he wasn't the Anakin she knew, but surely deep inside him, the heart of the man she loved still beat. *How he has suffered*, she thought as the images conjured up by Obi-Wan bombarded her mind. *He must have suffered tremendously... and he has lived the past five years believing that I am dead.*

Doubts and anxiety ate away at her as she considered what she would do with this information. Obi-Wan seemed convinced that Darth Vader was incapable of loving her or their children, that he would destroy them all, that he would allow his master to destroy them. Padmé refused to believe that, she refused to believe that the man she had known was gone. She knew that there was a part of Anakin in Darth Vader, that there was still good in him. No one capable of loving as deeply and completely as Anakin Skywalker did could simply stop loving as though turning off a switch. He was in pain, of that she was certain; and had probably suffered tremendously over the past five years. *Would the knowledge that she and the children lived be enough to save what was left of Anakin? Would it be enough to bring him back?*

"There's only one way to find out," she decided resolutely. *If he is given the chance to undo the past, to protect us from Palpatine after the way he allowed that monster to destroy us, will he take that chance? Is there enough of Anakin left inside of Darth Vader to choose us this time?*

"My lady, breakfast is ready."

Padmé turned to see Dormé standing there.

"Where are the children?" she asked.

"They are already eating," Dormé replied, walking over to Padmé. "What is it? You seem very distracted, very upset. Is something going on?"

Padmé frowned. "Yes, I'm afraid there is," she replied. "Dormé, Anakin is alive."

Dormé's eyes widened in shock. "What??" she exclaimed. "How? Where??"

Padmé thought for a moment. *If he's Darth Vader then he is the commander of the Fleet. No doubt he is on the flagship of the fleet right now.*

"I don't know exactly where he is, but I am sure I can find out," she said, walking over to her computer.

Dormé followed her, looking over her shoulder at the search she was performing. "Darth Vader??" she asked. "Why are you looking *him* up??"

"Because that is the name Anakin is using now," Padmé replied matter-of-factly.

"Anakin is Darth Vader??" Dormé cried. "How is that possible? What happened to him? How did Anakin become that monster??"

Padmé frowned. “He was injured on Mustafar,” she replied. ‘Obi-Wan nearly killed him, and left him to die. The emperor found him and turned him into the cyborg we know as Darth Vader.’ She turned and looked up at Dormé. “But I know that inside that suit, Anakin still exists, Dormé. I am certain of it.”

“I don’t like the way you’re talking, Padmé,” Dormé said with a frown. “It sounds to me like you intend on finding him.”

“That’s exactly what I intend to do,” Padmé replied, returning her attention to the computer screen. “Palpatine knows that I am alive, Dormé. It’s only a matter of time before he finds us. Anakin won’t let that happen; he will protect us. I know he will.”

“Padmé, are you mad?” Dormé asked. “We’re talking about Darth Vader here, the man who almost single handedly wiped out the Jedi! He is a monster, Padmé! He’s barely human! How can you think for a moment that he will care anything about you or the twins??”

Padmé frowned, ignoring her friend’s outburst. “I just do,” she said quietly. ‘You don’t understand, Dormé, just like Obi-Wan. No one could understand how I feel. But I know I’m right. And I will prove it.’ She pointed to the screen. “The imperial flag ship,” she said, indicating a star chart. “There it is.”

“Padmé, please, I’m begging you,” she said. “I know how much you loved Anakin, but he isn’t Anakin anymore! Don’t let the feelings you had for him make you do something foolish!”

Padmé sighed, tuning Dormé out. *You don’t understand, Dormé, how could you or anyone understand the depth of the love that Anakin and I shared? The strength of the bond between us? That bond still exists, that love is still there, even if it is buried under layers of pain and anger; I know it’s still there.*

“Please attend to the children, Dormé,” Padmé replied at last. “I have a lot to do.”

Dormé shook her head, knowing that once her mistress made her mind up about something, it was useless to try and argue. Obviously Obi-Wan had also tried to talk her out of this reckless course of action. Obviously he had failed, as he had left the house with his tail between his legs. Padmé Amidala was nothing if not single minded.

Padmé copied the coordinates of the location of the Imperial flag ship onto a data disc. She stood up, the disc in hand, and headed upstairs to pack.

Darth Vader returned to his chambers, trying to master the pain his body was engulfed in. The emperor was not pleased with him, and had no qualms about telling him so. Sidious had revealed how truly sadistic he was, forcing Vader to remain on his knees, knowing how painful it was for him with his prosthetics; but more sinister was his use of images of the past to punish Vader whenever he displeased him. His favorite was the image of his wife clutching her throat, choking. Sidious enjoyed the guilt and agony that particular image conjured up in his servant; for it always reduced Vader to a sniveling weakling, the weakness he still felt where Padmé Amidala was concerned still serving to control him.

Vader entered his chambers and sat down, trying to master the shaking in his limbs. He sat at his desk, holding his helmeted head in his great gloved hands, willing the agonizing images away. While physical pain was no stranger to Vader, the way his master had treated him was

far more painful. At one time Vader had believed that he and Palpatine were close friends, and that his master valued Vader's advice and the part he had played in the construction of the Empire. But it was obvious to Vader now that he had been mistaken. *No, not mistaken, used. Fooled, bamboozled and duped.* He meant no more to Palpatine than any of the thousands of officers and technicians who served aboard any one of the many ships in the vast Imperial fleet. *How could I have been so foolish?* Vader reproached himself bitterly. *I am nothing more than another servant to him, after everything I've done, after everything I've sacrificed...I am no better than a slave.* The thought of what he had done, how he had killed his wife and their unborn child, ate away at him in light of this agonizing revelation. *He told me he would help me save her... was that just a lie too? Did he ever have any intention of helping me? Or was it just part of his plan to use me for his own ends?*

"Lord Vader, please excuse the interruption."

Vader growled at the sound of the comm., and jabbed a finger on the response button. "What?" he snarled.

"Sir, a rather... unusual situation has arisen, sir," the voice on the other end replied. "We have a ship in our tractor beam sir. The pilot claims to be a rebel informant, and wants to talk to you."

Why me?? Vader thought petulantly. *Am I the only commander in this fleet??*

"Scan the ship," Vader replied. "It could be a trap. Scan for explosives or any weapons of mass destruction."

"We've done so, sir," the officer replied. "No sign of anything except for a small personal blaster. There are three life forms on board, sir; humans. Two of them are younglings."

Vader frowned. "Did you say younglings??" he asked incredulously.

"Yes sir," he replied.

Vader grew more puzzled by the moment. "Bring the ship on board," he said at last. "But be sure to have a full detachment ready, just to be sure."

"Of course, my lord."

Vader stood up and pushed the pain that still filled him deep down inside. He left his quarters and headed for the interrogation room. *You chose the wrong day to surrender, Rebel. I'm in no mood to be clement.*

The room was empty when Vader entered it. *Let's get this over with,* he thought sullenly. He sat down at the metal table, hoping that the interrogation would not require its use, and waited. As he did so, he became aware of a tremor in the Force, and it startled him. It wasn't very strong, but it was there nonetheless. *Was the Rebel who was surrendering a renegade Jedi?? Someone who had escaped the purges? Could it possibly be Kenobi?? No, his force signature was unmistakable, and much stronger. This was not as strong, and yet, somehow, familiar....*

The door slid open, and two armored clones escorted the small group into the room. Vader stood and looked at the two children first; a boy and a girl. *Who are these children? They looked up at him with eyes that were so familiar, so... gentle. Why aren't they afraid? And*

what was it about these children that was somehow unsettling?? He turned his attention away from the children and looked at the adult who accompanied them. A hooded cloak hid the person's face, but even without it he knew that it was a woman standing before him. A strange feeling starting coming over him as he focused on her, something intangible and yet undeniable. *It's almost as though I know her... almost as though...*

"Leave us," he ordered the clones who complied at once. He then lifted one hand and used the Force to lower the woman's hood, not speaking a word to her. When he beheld the face that was revealed, he stumbled back. *Padmé!!*

"Padmé....how... how can this be??" he stammered, holding onto the table for support. "This can't be... you're dead, you've been dead for five years! What sort of a joke is this?? Who are you??" he demanded angrily.

Padmé stepped forward, swallowing her fear and the pain of seeing the man she loved so changed, so dark and so full of anger and pain.

"It's not a joke," she said. "It's me, it's Padmé. And these are my children." *Our children.*

Vader looked back at the children, realizing that it was their Force signature that he had felt... that meant that they truly were his children, and that meant that she truly was...*my angel..*

"Palpatine told me that you were dead," he said at last, finding his voice. "He told me that I had killed you."

Padmé shook her head. "He lied," she said softly. "Just like he lied about everything. We've both been lied to. Obi-Wan told me that you had died on Mustafar; I only found out a few days ago that you were alive. I've believed that you were dead for the past five years, just as you thought I was dead."

Vader felt the anger welling up within him again. "How did you find out? I find it hard to believe that Kenobi would tell you the truth all of a sudden."

"He did," Padmé replied. 'He felt it was necessary to tell me because Palpatine has managed to find out that I am alive, and he was afraid that he would find me and the children through you.' She watched him, wishing she could see his face, read his eyes. His silence worried her, and yet she pressed on. "I told him that he was wrong to hide the truth from me," she continued. "I told him that you would never do anything to harm the children, or me."

Vader was shocked by her words. How could she be so certain after what he had done to her on Mustafar? How was it possible that she still had faith in his humanity when he himself did not see a shred of it within himself anymore?

"Tell me I'm right, Anakin," she said at last, using his name for the first time, unable to stand his silence any longer. "Tell me that my belief in you hasn't been misplaced."

Vader sat down, overwhelmed. *If this is a dream, I will go mad, I know it...* He looked at the young children who were watching him with guarded curiosity. *Do they know who I am? Has Padmé told them that their father is a monster?*

"They are beautiful," he said at last. "What are your names?" he asked them.

Luke and Leia looked up at their mother as though seeking her approval to speak to the dark, mysterious stranger. Padmé simply nodded.

“My name is Leia,” Leia spoke up, the bolder of the two.

“And you....my boy?” he asked, the words creating a rush of emotion he had never expected he would feel again.

“Luke,” Luke replied quietly in a small voice.

“My brother is shy,” Leia said, not at all shy. “He’s not afraid, just shy.”

Vader nodded, amused by his daughter’s outspokenness. “Is that so?” He asked. “And you’re not afraid either?”

Leia shook her head. “No, mommy told us that you would never hurt us, that you would protect us.”

Vader looked back up at Padmé. “Your mother is correct,” he said, feeling the bond with his children beginning to form. “I will.”

Padmé smiled, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

“What is that for?” Leia asked, demanding her father’s attention once again.

Vader looked to where her small finger was pointing. “That helps me to breath,” he said. “It also controls how warm I am.”

“Why do you need it?” Luke asked timidly.

Vader turned to his son, amazed at the startling resemblance the boy bore him as when he was a boy. “It’s a long story, Luke,” he said. “I will explain it all to you.”

“I like your cape,” Leia continued, rubbing the silky fabric between two chubby fingers. “It’s soft.”

Under his mask, Vader smiled for the first time in five years. “Thank you,” he said simply. He looked back up at Padmé, wishing she could see the look in his eyes, the adoration he felt at that moment for all of them. ‘We need to make a plan,’ he said to her. “I am not going to allow any of you to be found by the emperor, even if it means killing him with my own hands. I promise you, Padmé. I won’t let any harm come to any of you.”

Padmé nodded as the tears spilled down her cheeks. “I knew you wouldn’t,” she said softly. “I knew I would find you, Ani.”

Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Leia announced as Vader escorted the three of them down the corridor. "And so is Luke," speaking for her brother, as she often did.

"I'll get you something as soon as we reach your quarters," Vader told his daughter. "Not much further."

Padmé felt uneasy at the strange looks the men who passed them by gave her, some more than a little appraising. *How is he going to explain our presence here without raising suspicion?* She wondered, looking at the tall, broad figure of her husband ahead of her. She thought it would be best if they maintained the appearance of being enemies; but the children's fascination with their father might make that difficult. Leia in particular was absolutely captivated by the tall dark man, the bond between father and daughter already forming despite the fact that she did not yet know he actually was her father. Luke was a little more reticent; being more reserved than his twin, he was naturally uneasy around all strangers, and this one was no exception. Yet even he felt drawn to the masked stranger, and managed to get a word or two in edgewise while they walked through the corridor.

"Right in here," Vader said as he opened a door leading to a rather spacious suite. 'This is reserved for visiting dignitaries,' he explained to Padmé as the three of them entered after him. "I think the three of you qualify."

Padmé smiled, watching Luke and Leia as they ran around the room, checking out the amenities. "A food synth!" Leia exclaimed as she saw the computer console embedded in one wall near a table and chairs. "Mommy, I'm hungry!!"

"What would you like, Leia?" Vader asked as he walked over to the console. He bent close so that only she could hear him. 'I've been told that the ice cream is particularly good,' he told her. "Leia looked up at him, her large dark eyes sparkling." Did you say ice cream? "she asked. Vader simply nodded." Oh yes, that's what I want! Chocolate please." She added, anticipating her father's question.

"As you wish, my lady," he said, typing in the command. Leia giggled. She looked at Luke, communicating with him in the uncanny manner that Padmé had come to accept as normal for the children of the Chosen One.

"Luke would like some too," Leia told Vader, turning back to him.

Vader turned to Luke. "Is that right?" he asked.

Luke nodded. "Yes, sir," he replied softly.

Within moments Luke too had a large dish of ice cream. He and Leia sat at the table, amazed that they had been permitted to eat ice cream so close to bed time.

Vader watched his children for a moment before returning to Padmé.

"They are already starting to love you," she said to him. "Did you see the look in Leia's eyes when you gave her that ice cream?"

Vader looked back at the children. "I don't know about that," he said. "I think the ice cream is the object of her adoration, not me."

Padmé laughed, and the sound of it was like music to his ears.

"Do they know, Padmé?" he asked, turning back to her. "Have you told them who I am?"

Padmé shook her head. "No, not yet," she said. "There hasn't been time. All of this happened so fast. I don't think it will be a problem though, do you? They seem very comfortable with you."

"Yes, they do," he said. "Which surprises me. I expected them to be afraid."

"Why would they be?" she asked.

"Look at me, Padmé," he replied. "I don't even look human anymore."

Padmé frowned, her anger for Obi-Wan welling up within her again. "Thanks to Obi-Wan," she muttered.

Vader was surprised by her comment. "He told you what happened?" he asked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "Although originally he had told me that you had died. I can't imagine how you must have suffered, Anakin..."

"I no longer use that name, Padmé," Vader replied. "Anakin Skywalker died on that day. He died when he was told that he had killed you."

Padmé frowned. "But you didn't," she argued. "I'm alive, Anakin. And I refuse to call you Vader. I'm sorry, but if I didn't believe with all my heart that you were Anakin, I wouldn't be here right now."

Vader did not reply. Her words were so unexpected, and so provocative. He had stopped thinking of himself as Anakin Skywalker many years earlier; was there anything left of that man within him now?

"Look," she said, nodding in the direction of the children. Both of them had their heads resting on the table top, fast asleep, their faces covered with chocolate ice cream. The sight of them grabbed at his heart, filling him with unfamiliar warmth. *If there is no trace of Skywalker within you, why do you love these children already?*

"It's been a long day," she said, standing up and walking over to the table.

Vader stood up and followed her, watching as she picked up Leia in her arms. She kissed her gently on the forehead and carried her over to the large bed in the adjoining room. Vader looked down at the small boy who was sleeping so peacefully before him. Gently, tentatively, he picked Luke up in his arms. He stood for a moment, examining his son's face, his heart aching with love for the boy. *How can I feel such fierce devotion to someone I just met? Because we are connected. Because he is a part of me.* Gently he took one hand and brushed the hair from Luke's brow, wishing fervently that he could kiss his child, that he could feel the softness of his hair.

Padmé left the sleeping area and stopped in the doorway, riveted to the floor by the sight before her. There stood Vader, holding his small son in his arms, looking intently into the boy's face, one hand gently stroking Luke's golden hair. She felt her tears returning, moved beyond words by the poignant scene. *You **are** Anakin Skywalker, no matter how much you try to deny it...* she thought. *You just need to admit it to yourself.*

Vader sensed Padmé's presence and walked over to her. Padmé kissed her son's cheek, and then stepped back so that his father could carry him to the bed. Carefully Vader lay Luke down beside Leia, and stood watching the two of them for a moment. *What do I do now?* He thought. *How do I protect this precious family from that monster Sidious? I will protect them, though; no matter what it takes. No one will ever harm this family so long as I am alive. I swear it.*

Vader pulled a blanket up and tucked it under the children's chins with more tenderness than he would ever have imagined himself capable of.

"You should sleep as well," he told Padmé as he left the room. "I'm sure you must be tired."

She nodded. "Thank you," she said.

"There is no need to thank me," he said. "After all I put you through, Padmé, this is the least I can do."

Padmé frowned. "Is that why you are helping us? Because you feel guilty about the past?"

Vader shook his head. "No," he replied. "That isn't what I meant. I mean that... this is what I should have been doing all along, Padmé; protecting you and our children. That is what I thought I was doing when everything went so wrong."

Padmé knew what he was referring to. She remembered on that horrible day on Mustafar how he had tried to justify all his dark deeds by telling her that he had done them for her, to protect her. *That was Sidious' doing.*

"Can I ask you something?" she asked as she sat down on one of the chairs in the sitting room.

Vader sat down facing her, nodding. "Yes, of course."

Padmé hesitated momentarily, trying to phrase her question in a way that would not anger him.

"Do you know now what really happened?" she asked. "Do you see now how Palpatine used you?"

Vader sat for a moment, reflecting upon her words. "Yes, I see everything all too clearly now, Padmé. I see now that when he told me that in order to save you from my nightmares I needed to embrace the Dark Side that he was lying; that when he promised to help me save you if I became his apprentice, he was lying; when he told me that you had died at my hand..." he stood up, agitated by the anger that these horrific truths bombarded him with. 'He used me, Padmé,' he said, not looking at her. "He used my love for you to destroy both of us. But I allowed him to do it, and so I am as guilty as he is for what happened."

Padmé watched him, seeing how much pain he was in, how deep the guilt was that he felt. *If only he had told me back then what was going on... if only I'd known the way he was suffering, the struggle he went through, and how Palpatine fed on this struggle to destroy him.* "I wish I'd known what you were going through, Ani," she said at last, refusing to use his Sith name. "I wish you had let me help you with the struggle you went through."

Vader turned back to her. "How could I tell you, Padmé?" he asked.

Padmé stood up. "You could always tell me anything, Anakin, you know that. Perhaps if you'd confided in me, if you'd trusted me more, this never would have happened."

Vader did not reply.

"I didn't know Obi-Wan was on board my ship when I came to Mustafar," she continued. "I hope you realize that now. I never would have betrayed you, Anakin. Never."

"I...I know that now, Padmé," he said at last. "And I blame Obi-Wan almost as much as Sidious for what happened that day. I know that he used you to get to me. I only wish that I had seen that five years ago, instead of believing the worst."

Padmé nodded sadly. "Yes, me too."

They looked at one another in silence for a moment, reminders of the past causing them both to become pensive and melancholy.

"You need to sleep," Vader said at last. "And I need to get to the bridge. Sleep well, Padmé."

"Thank you," she said, watching him as he left, wondering what the future would bring now that he was back in her life again.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER 6

"Where is she, Dormé, where did she go?"

Dormé could see how desperate Obi-wan was to find Padmé and the twins, but she had promised her mistress that she wouldn't tell anyone of her plans.

"I can't tell you," Dormé replied. "I'm sorry!"

Obi-Wan stared at the young woman, trying to find the information he needed in her mind; but Dormé was doing an effective job of blocking him. No doubt her mistress had warned her of Kenobi's Jedi skills, and she was on her guard.

"You can't or you won't," he said at last, folding his arms over his chest.

Dormé shook her head. "Both," she replied, not letting him intimidate her with his icy stare.

"Dormé, I don't think you realize how dangerous a situation Padmé is in," he continued, trying a different tactic. "If she has gone where I think she has, then she and the twins are in grave danger. Vader will kill them all!"

Dormé shook her head. "Padmé would never place her twins in jeopardy," she replied. "You know that."

"Padmé is blinded by her love for Anakin," he replied. "Who is dead, and has been dead for five years. She won't listen to reason, Dormé, that is why she has gone. Now tell me, tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything!" she cried. "Why do you think I know where she is??"

"Because you are her confidante," Kenobi returned. "She tells you everything."

"Not everything," she replied. "I'm sorry, Obi-wan. I can't help you."

It wasn't like a Jedi to feel anger, but Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel a surge of it, coupled with tremendous frustration. *If you won't help me, Dormé, then I will just have to find her myself.* Without another word, he left her and ran out of the house.

I have to contact Senator Organa, Obi-Wan thought as he headed back to his own home. *Between the two of us we will know what to do. I won't let Vader take Padmé and her children prisoner, I won't let him win.*

Kenobi headed to his computer console as soon as he reached home, and immediately contacted the Alderaanian embassy on Coruscant. Sala Dakwin, Organa's assistant, answered his hail.

"Master Kenobi," she said, surprised to see him. "What are you doing on this frequency?"

"I know it's risky, Miss Dakwin, but I have no choice," Kenobi replied. "I must speak to the Viceroy at once."

"I'm sorry, sir," Sala replied. "But he's not on Coruscant. He left just yesterday for Alderaan. It's Winter's birthday," she explained.

Kenobi nodded his understanding, inwardly frustrated at his inability to contact Organa. "Thank you," he replied simply and switched off the screen. Obviously Organa would want to be home to celebrate the birthday of his adopted daughter, the child of his previous assistant, Sheltay Retrac, who had died along with her husband a few years earlier. Winter was only a year older than Padmé's twins, enjoying a life of privilege under the protection of the royal family of Alderaan. It had been Obi-Wan's hope that the Organa's would adopt one of the Skywalker twins, but Padmé would not hear of giving up her precious children, no matter what. *I hope you will not regret that decision, Padmé*, Kenobi thought anxiously as he entered the call sign for Alderaan next. *I hope Vader doesn't make you regret your decision.*

After being redirected several times, Kenobi finally came face to face with Bail Organa.

"Obi-Wan," Bail said, not trying to hide his surprise at seeing the Jedi master. "It's good to see you. What is going on?" Organa knew that there must be a very good reason for Kenobi to be making contact; they had agreed that only in the most dire of situations would communication between the two be necessary.

"A lot," Kenobi replied. "Palpatine has found out the Padmé is alive."

Organa's eyes widened. "What?? How??"

Kenobi went on to describe to Organa the message he had received from the administrator of Polis Massa, and how it undoubtedly meant that Palpatine was now on the trail of Padmé Amidala.

"We have to move her," Organa said at last. "My family has a retreat on..."

"There's more to it, Senator," Obi-Wan interrupted him. "Padmé has gone. She left two days ago."

"Gone? Where did she go? Did she take the twins with her??"

Kenobi sighed. "I'm afraid she has gone to find him, Bail. She's gone to find Vader."

"Why in the name of the seven moons of Fresia would she do that?" Organa cried. "Has she lost her mind??"

"I'm afraid she has," Obi-Wan replied. "I had no choice but to tell her Vader's true identity, and now she is convinced that he will protect her and the twins from Palpatine. She is blinded by her love for Anakin, and doesn't understand that Vader is not he."

"This is terrible," Organa replied with a frown. "Just terrible; we have to stop her, Obi-Wan. Vader will destroy her and take her children to his emperor."

"I tried to tell her that," Kenobi replied miserably. "But she went anyway. I am assuming she has gone to the fleet to find him. But how do we get to her without the Empire blasting us from the stars?"

Organa thought for a moment. "Perhaps I can intervene," he said at last. "I'm an Imperial senator, after all; the Empire would kill you on sight, Obi-wan, you know that."

"Yes, I've thought of that," Kenobi replied. "But if it meant that it could save them, I would gladly give my life to do so."

"I know that, old friend," Organa replied. "But let's hope it doesn't get to that point. Let me see what I can do first before we make any drastic moves."

Kenobi nodded. "Very well," he replied. "I will wait to hear from you, Bail. Thank you. And good luck."

It had been a long time since Darth Vader had actually looked forward to anything; but with his wife and children on board the *Exactor*, he found himself looking forward to every moment he could steal away to see them.

It was morning, and Vader had arranged the previous evening to have the few personal belongings that Padmé had brought with her brought to her quarters. *Let's hope the idiots managed to follow that simple order*, he reflected as he made his way to the quarters where his family was staying. Using this as his excuse for going there helped him to maintain the outward appearance of detachment where they were concerned; however, he himself knew that was a lie. The entire previous night he had done nothing but think of them, and even the short stretches of sleep he managed to get were full of dreams of them. *Dreams of her...* Dreams from another life time, of times spent with her that seemed unimaginable now. It had been five years since he had seen his wife, and during those five years he had fought to sublimate the feelings he had for her, the physical need he had for her. He had managed to conquer those feelings; but now that she was back in his life, they were returning once again. She was just as beautiful as he'd remembered, just as desirable; *put that out of your mind*, he told himself. *You're living in a walking coffin, remember?*

He arrived at the door of his family's quarters and stopped. He remembered a time when he used to love surprising Padmé, when he would arrive home from the war and steal into their apartment and sweep her off her feet....*but those days are long gone, and will never return... no matter how things seem right now.*

Vader used the door chime, and it wasn't long before a voice on the other side was heard.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Padmé," he said. "May I come in?"

The door slid open and Padmé stood there before him, still in her nightgown.

"Good morning," she said with a smile. "Come on in."

Padmé stepped aside and allowed him to pass. Trying to ignore how feminine and pretty she looked in her white nightgown and her hair loose around her shoulders, Vader entered the room.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," she replied.

"Where are the children?" he asked, looking around.

Padmé looked towards the bedroom. “Oh, they’re in there, playing,” she replied.

He nodded his understanding and sat down. “I think I have an idea, Padmé,” he said as she sat down across from him. “We are approaching the....”

His sentence was interrupted as the twins came running into the room, laughing.

“Hi!” Leia said, stopping short when she saw Vader.

“Good morning, my lady,” Vader replied. “How are you today?”

“I’m good,” she said. “How are you?”

How am I? When was the last time someone asked me that?

“I’m good too,” he replied at last. He turned to Luke. “And you, young Luke? How are you today?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Luke replied with a shy smile.

“Guess what I had for breakfast!” Leia said, demanding the spotlight once again.

Vader turned his attention to her once again. “What did you have?” he asked.

“Eggs,” she replied. “Scrambled eggs. Luke had pancakes. What did you have?” she asked.

An intravenous filled with some sort of fluid... I don’t even know what it tastes like...

“Nothing nearly as good as eggs or pancakes,” he replied at last.

Padmé could sense how uncomfortable the child’s questions had made him, and felt awful for it. *Are you even capable of eating anymore, Ani?* She wondered sadly.

“Well I need to get dressed,” she said at last, standing up. ‘Would you mind?’ she asked Vader. “I won’t be long.”

Vader looked up at her. “Of course,” he replied. “Take your time.”

“Thanks,” she said. She looked at the twins. “Be good,” she said.

Vader couldn’t help but notice that she was looking directly at Leia when she made that comment, and smiled to himself. It seemed his daughter was something of a character, her personality as outgoing and lively as his had once been.

Padmé left the three of them alone and went to the fresher to have a shower and get dressed.

“So, did you sleep well?” he asked his children when they were alone.

They both nodded, both of them regarding him closely.

“Why do you wear a mask?” Leia asked. Both of the twins had wanted to ask him, but Luke was far too shy to do so. Leia, however, was not.

“I need to wear it, I’m afraid,” he replied. “I cannot live without it.”

Luke and Leia frowned, almost simultaneously. “Why not?” Luke asked.

Vader sighed. *How do I explain it to you, my little ones?* He thought sadly. *How do I make you understand something so horrible?*

"It's a long and rather painful story, I'm afraid," he said at last, putting a gloved hand on a shoulder of each child. "But if you would like to hear it, I will tell you some day."

Luke and Leia accepted this, and continued their examination of him. Vader sensed that the two of them were communicating silently, and it amazed him how strongly the Force was with them. *Why should that be a surprise, though? They're your offspring.*

"You're our daddy, aren't you?" Leia said at last.

Vader turned to her, astonished beyond words. Padmé had not told them yet, that he knew for certain. So how did she know? *And how do I answer her question?*

"Why do you ask me that?" he asked at last.

Leia turned to Luke. "Because we know it's true," Luke replied, looking at his father. "It is true, isn't it?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, it is," he replied. "I hope that doesn't disappoint you."

"What does that mean?" Leia asked. "Disappoint?"

"It means that... well, that you wish your father were someone else," Vader explained patiently. "Or that he didn't look the way I do," he added self-consciously.

Luke shook his head. "Mommy always says what is inside you is more important than what is outside," he said.

Vader couldn't speak for a moment, he couldn't respond to his small son's words. *How could one so young be so wise?*

"You're mother is a very wise woman," Vader said at last.

"Our mommy is the most beautiful woman in the whole wide galaxy," Leia stated proudly.

Vader found himself smiling again. "Yes, she certainly is," he replied.

"She certainly is what?"

The three of them looked up to see Padmé standing there, wearing trousers and a tunic, braiding her long hair.

"What are the three of you talking about?" she asked, walking over to them.

"You," Vader replied simply.

Padmé raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" she said, looking at the twins. "What about me?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another and smiled.

"Leia told Daddy that you were the most beautiful woman in the galaxy," Luke informed her.

Padmé's eyes widened at her son's words. *Daddy??* She looked at Vader, assuming that he had told them of their paternity, upset that he had done so without her permission.

“Children you need to get dressed,” Padmé announced. “I’ve laid clothes out for you on your bed. Go on, go get dressed.”

“Okay,” Leia said with less than enthusiasm. “Come on Luke,” she said, taking her twin’s hand.

Padmé watched them go and then turned back to Vader. “You told them?? We hadn’t even talked about how we were going to do it, and you just went ahead and did it??”

Vader shook his head. “No, Padmé, I didn’t tell them, I swear to you,” he said.

Padmé frowned, sensing that he was telling her the truth. “Then, how did they know?”

“They simply did,” Vader replied. ‘I can’t explain it,’ he said. “Leia just came out and asked.”

Padmé was stunned, and didn’t know how to respond. *The Force connection... the same connection that enables Luke and Leia to communicate without words that is how they knew...*

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I never dreamed they would be able to just...guess.”

“It wasn’t a guess, Padmé,” Vader replied. “They can sense it; they can feel the connection we share.”

She nodded. “I guess so,” she replied. “And they are fine with it, aren’t they?”

“Amazingly enough, yes they are,” Vader replied.

Padmé smiled. “They know who you truly are, Anakin; the appearance means nothing to them. They can sense how much you love them, and that’s all that matters.”

Vader nodded, not even trying to deny that he did love his children. It frightened him how much he loved them, how much he still loved Padmé; protecting them was all that mattered to him now. The focus of his life had shifted irrevocably, and for the first time in five years he felt as though his purpose was one worth living for.

“You said that you had an idea earlier,” Padmé said, throwing her long braid behind her and leaning forward to look at him. “What is it??”

Vader looked at her, his eyes taking in every centimeter of her beautiful face. His eyes were attracted to the pendant around her neck, and was astonished to see that it was the very japor snippet that he had given her as a boy so many years ago. He leaned toward her and took it in his gloved hand, looking at it reflectively. “You still have this,” he commented, stating the obvious.

Padmé nodded. “Of course,” she said. “I have worn it every day since you gave it to me, Anakin.”

He looked up at her, surprised by her revelation. “Have you?”

She nodded, looking down at it. “Yes,” she said, taking it from him. They both sat in silence for a moment, the tension between them suddenly palpable. “Tell me about your plan,” she said at last.

Vader sat back in his seat. "Who besides Kenobi knows that you are alive?" he asked, playing out a hunch.

Padmé was surprised by his question. "Bail Organa," she replied. "And Master Yoda. Why?"

Vader nodded. *Just as I suspected.*

"We obviously cannot go to Coruscant, or Naboo, or to any of the planets where I own property," he began. "Sidious would look there at once. We need to go somewhere that he would never think of, somewhere that has no connection to you or me."

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "Obviously. So what do you have in mind?"

Vader was about to answer her when Luke and Leia came barreling into the room. To Vader's utter shock, each of them came straight to him, and proceeded to seat themselves on his lap, each one sitting on one of his massive thighs. Padmé smiled, surprised but pleased to see them so accepting of him. Vader put an arm around each of them, and then turned his attention back to Padmé, as though it was every day that he had two small children perched on his lap.

"We are approaching the Alderaan System," he told her. "Bail Organa may be able to help us. His loyalty to you is above question; he is a powerful man with many connections."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I think that's a brilliant idea," she said. "He will help us; I have no doubt of that."

"Good," he said. "I don't think it would be wise for you to go to him, though; we cannot take the chance that you would be seen by someone with a connection to Sidious. I will go to him."

"Okay, I think that's probably for the best," she said. "I only hope he can accept that you are trying to help us, and trust you enough to offer help."

"Yes, me too," Vader said. He turned his attention to his children, noticing how his son looked upset. "What is it, Luke?" he asked.

Luke looked up at him, his big blue eyes shining with tears. "I can't find Spotty," he said softly.

"Spotty is Luke's favorite stuffed bear," Leia explained. "It wasn't in his bag."

"It must have been left behind," Padmé said. "I'm sorry, Luke," she added, reaching over and stroking the boy's face as the tears started to fall.

The sight of his small boy's tears tore Vader up more than he ever could have imagined possible, and it made him realize the ferocity of his protectiveness for his family.

"What does Spotty look like?" Vader asked, determined to fix the situation.

Luke looked up at him. "He's yellow," he said softly. "And he has blue spots on him."

Vader nodded, seeing the image of the toy in his son's mind and committing it to memory. "I will find him, Luke," he said. "Don't worry."

Padmé did not question his statement, reasoning that if he set his mind to it, Anakin would make it happen.

“I need to get back to the bridge,” he said. “We’ll be reaching Alderaan within the next few hours.”

Padmé nodded her understanding. “Okay, come on children,” she said, holding her hands out to them. “Time for Daddy to go.”

Reluctantly the children left their father and sat down with their mother.

“I will be back later,” he told them all. “Don’t worry, Luke. I won’t rest until I find the renegade bear.”

Luke smiled, not completely understanding his father’s comment, but appreciating the sentiment behind it.

Vader looked one more time at his wife, and then left the family he loved and returned to the bridge.

Chapter 7

CHAPTER 7

Bail Organa and his wife, Breha had just finished their mid day meal when one of the household servants entered the dining room.

“Excuse me, your highness,” he said, addressing Bail. “Lord Vader is here.”

Bail and Breha looked at one another. “What does he want??” Breha asked with a frown.

“I don’t know,” Bail replied, standing up at once. “But I’d better see at once. The last thing we need is him losing his temper.”

Breha and their six year old daughter, Winter, watched him leave.

“What does Lord Vader want with Daddy?” Winter asked.

Breha shook her head. “I don’t know, darling,” she replied, trying to hide her fear from the child. “But I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” she added, trying to convince herself that this was so.

Vader was in the spacious office of Bail Organa, standing with his hands behind his back, examining the many holographic portraits on the walls. The child in the photo was dark haired with dark eyes, much like his own daughter, and looked roughly the same age as Leia. Vader smiled to himself as he thought of how spunky she was, how outspoken and confident she was. *Padmé has done an incredible job with them both*, he thought. The twins were so different; Luke seemed more like Padmé in personality, gentle, more reserved, and yet wise beyond his years; while Leia seemed much more like himself. *Or at least the person I used to be*, he corrected himself.

“Lord Vader, what brings you to Alderaan?”

Vader turned around and saw Bail Organa standing there, his dark eyes full of trepidation and barely concealed animosity.

“A matter of great importance,” Vader replied. “Involving my family.”

Organa’s eyes widened. “Your *family*??” he repeated. “I wasn’t aware you had one, Vader.”

Vader did his best to master his anger at the man’s audacity. “You of all people know that I do,” he replied evenly. “You are, after all, one of the few people who know my wife did not in fact die on Mustafar.”

Organa did not reply immediately. *Is he trying to trick me? Is he laying a trap??*

“Padmé and our children came to me recently,” Vader continued when Organa did not respond. “It seems all these years she believed that I was dead, just as I thought she was.”

“You expect me to believe that Padmé would go to *you*?” Organa exclaimed at once, unable to hold his tongue any longer. “After Mustafar? After the way you betrayed her?”

Vader clenched his fists angrily. "If it were safe for her to be seen in public, I would have brought her down to the planet," he replied at last. "But as you surely realize, the emperor has been looking for her and I will not risk her safety."

Organa frowned, not believing his ears. "And you pose no risk to her safety? Is that what you want me to believe?"

Vader sighed. "I realize that is difficult for you to believe, but it is the truth. Padmé came to me seeking my protection, and I will do whatever it takes to protect her and our children, even if it means killing the emperor myself to do it."

Organa was taken aback by the adamancy of Vader's words. *Was he sincere in his desire to protect Padmé and the twins? Or was this some sort of elaborate ruse? To what end, though; what does he hope to accomplish??*

"So what do you want from me?" Organa asked at last, still trying to discern Vader's motives.

"I need a place to hide her and the children," Vader replied. "A place that the emperor would never think of, a place that has no connection with Padmé or with me."

Organa wasn't sure how to respond. *What are the real reasons you want to hide her, Vader? What is really going on?*

Vader, of course, could easily read the questions and doubts in Organa's mind. And although he resented them, he couldn't really blame Organa; after all, what reason had he given anyone recently to trust his motives?

"My family means more to me than anything in the galaxy, Viceroy," Vader said at last. 'You may not believe that, but it is the truth. Perhaps I was wrong to expect you to help us,' he said. "Padmé seemed certain that you would, but I have my doubts." He walked towards the door, frustrated and disappointed that his plans had gone awry. *Padmé will be so disappointed*, he thought to himself. *Now what??*

"Vader, wait."

Vader stopped in his tracks and turned back to Organa.

"I would like to see Padmé," he said, "and the twins. See for myself that she is unharmed and that you are on the level with this."

Vader nodded. "Very well," he said. "Come with me."

Organa was surprised, expecting Vader to find some reasons why he could not see her; but he had not. His desire to help her seemed genuine; *we'll see...* Organa thought.

The two men walked through the embassy towards where Vader had left his shuttle. They spoke very little, both of them lost in their own thoughts.

"Oh, before we go," Vader said as they boarded the shuttle. "There is one thing more I require."

Here we go, Organa thought smugly, waiting for the excuses to start.

"I need to...to visit a toy shop," Vader replied.

Vader's words could not have been more surprising. "What did you say??" Organa asked.

"A toy shop," Vader replied. "A place to buy toys. Do you know where I may find such a place?"

Organa nodded. "Of course," he replied. "I'll take you there if you wish."

"I do," Vader replied. "Let's go at once. I have a promise to keep."

Organa was intrigued by the Dark Lord's words, and lead him to a speeder. Organa drove into the city center, starting to think that this was all some sort of surreal dream he was having. *I'm driving Darth Vader to a toy store... this can't be real...*

"Here we are," Organa said as he parked the speeder in the street across from a large toy store. "Will that do?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, it should suffice," he replied, opening the door to the speeder. Organa got out too, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Vader walked into the store, ignoring the shocked and alarmed looks of the other patrons. The shop keeper approached him nervously, wringing his hands together.

"C-c-c-can I help you, Lord Vader??" He asked.

Vader nodded. "I'm looking for a stuffed bear," he said.

Organa stood behind Vader, hearing him with incredulity.

"We have a number of stuffed bears, my lord," the shopkeeper said, "please, this way."

Vader and Organa followed the little man to a section of the store where there were many shelves of plush toys.

"As you can see, my lord, we have many bears," the store keeper said proudly. "Of every size and color you can imagine. Is there something particular you'd like?"

Vader ignored the man, his eyes scanning each and every toy on the shelf, searching for the one he had seen in Luke's mind. *Too big, wrong color, no dots...* He thought in frustration, not seeing what he wanted. And then he saw it. Using the Force, he brought the small yellow bear to his hand.

"This is the one," he said, turning to the merchant.

The merchant nodded. "Of course, sir," he said. "Let me wrap it for you."

"Shall we?" Vader said as he and Organa returned to the embassy.

Organa nodded as they boarded the shuttle. He had not said anything since they had entered the toy store, for he had no idea what to say. The sight of the Dark Lord of the Sith with a small teddy bear in his hands was one he never expected to see as long as he lived, nor one he would forget either. *Was this all part of his plan? To lull me into a false sense of security? To fool me into thinking he is human under all that leather and metal?* Yet, the single mindedness of Vader as he scoured the shelves for just that particular bear was very much like that of a father looking for just the right toy, just as he himself had searched for the very doll that his own child, Winter, had wanted for her birthday a few weeks earlier.

As for Vader, he had stopped caring about what Organa thought. He felt certain that Padmé would convince him of the sincerity of their request. But what was foremost on his mind was how pleased he was to have found a bear to replace the one Luke had lost. He could hardly wait to give it to him and see the look on the boy's face when his beloved Spotty returned.

"Who is it for?"

Vader turned and looked at Organa as they headed for the *Exactor*.

"What?" Vader asked simply.

"The bear," Organa said. "Who is it for?"

Vader turned his attention back to the controls. "My son," he replied simply.

Organa nodded, understanding completely, and yet still not understanding at all. If Darth Vader were the cold, heartless beast that the galaxy knew him to be, why had he been so hell bent on finding just the right bear for his son? Were those the actions of a heartless cyborg? Or a loving father?

"He lost his," Vader explained. "And is miserable without it."

"I know what that's like," Organa replied. 'My little girl couldn't find her favorite doll for nearly a week,' he told Vader. "One of the longest weeks of my life, I tell you."

"I can imagine," Vader agreed.

As incredible as it seemed, particularly to Organa, the two men were actually sharing a fatherly discussion about their children. And by the time they reached the *Exactor*, Organa was starting to see that the presence of his twins in Vader's life had made a huge impact, changing the Dark Lord at a level that no one who had not witnessed it first hand would ever believe.

"Padmé is not expecting you, but I'm sure she will be pleased to see you again nonetheless," Vader told Organa as he led him to the quarters where Padmé and the twins were staying.

Organa simply nodded, bracing himself for anything, for even still he was not entirely convinced that this change in Vader was not apart of an elaborate plan. As soon as the door to Padmé's quarters opened, however, all doubts in his mind evaporated.

"Daddy!" Leia exclaimed as she rushed him at the door. Vader bent and picked up the child.

"Hello, my lady," he said. "Are you all alone this afternoon?"

Leia giggled, as she did every time he called her that. "No, of course not," she said.

"Bail! What are you doing here??"

Organa looked over to see Padmé entering the room, holding the hand of a small boy he assumed must be Leia's twin brother, Luke.

"I came... came here to see you," he said, watching as the boy greeted his father in much the same manner as Leia had, though not quite as aggressively.

Vader picked Luke up as well, as Organa watched in utter shock.

"Well come in and sit down," Padmé said. "It's good to see you after so long. How is Breha? And your little girl, Winter, right?"

Organa nodded, dumbfounded by the picture of familial harmony that he was witnessing.

"They are fine, thanks," he said.

"Senator Organa felt the need to speak to you personally, Padmé," Vader explained, sitting down with the twins. "He naturally has some...reservations where I am concerned."

"Oh?" Padmé said. "Such as?" she asked, turning back to Organa.

Organa didn't know what to say at this point. Clearly the man seated between two obviously adoring children was not same Sith Lord Organa had come to hate and fear; the look in the eyes of the children, as well as Padmé, told him that Vader had indeed changed, that the presence of his family in his life had created some sort of metamorphosis in him. Suddenly it seemed entirely possible that what Vader had said down on the planet surface was true, that he was telling the truth. This was a not a man intent on keeping prisoners; this was a man who was desperate to protect his family, who he obviously loved a great deal.

"I'd almost forgotten," Vader said before Organa could speak. He reached into the great folds of his cloak and pulled out a package, and handed it to Luke. The boy took the package, looking up at his father questioningly.

"Go ahead, son," Vader urged him gently. "Open it."

"Yeah, open it!" Leia urged, only slightly envious that her brother had received a gift and she had not.

Luke pulled back the store wrapping to see the small yellow, spotted bear that Vader had bought on the planet below. He looked back up at his father, his eyes conveying the love and appreciation he felt within him.

"I told you I'd find him," Vader told Luke, tousling his blond locks affectionately.

"Mommy, look! Spotty!" Luke said excitedly, showing Padmé.

Padmé smiled. "That is wonderful!" She replied. "See how much your father loves you?"

Luke turned back to his father and nodded, and then put his small arms around Vader's neck to embrace him.

Bail Organa sat watching the scene before him, his mind almost refusing to believe what his eyes were seeing. *How can I not help this family?* He thought to himself. *How can I betray them to Kenobi the way he hopes I will?*

"Well Bail, will you help us?" Padmé said at last, seeing the look of shock on the senator's face.

Bail turned to her. "Yes, Padmé," he replied finally. "I will."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

"My family has a cottage on Delaya," Organa told Padmé and Vader. "Deep in a heavily forested area. It's quite remote. Would that suffice?"

"Yes, that would do nicely," Vader replied, nodding his head. "Aside from Alderaan itself, the Emperor would have little interest in the system."

"I agree," Organa replied. "The place hasn't been used in a while; it may be in need of a little work."

"That's alright," Padmé said. "I'm not afraid of getting my hands dirty."

"I'm sure you're not," Organa replied with a smile. "And with two extra pairs of hands, you will have no trouble at all getting the place all set."

"I wish I'd brought Threepio and Artoo with us," Padmé sighed. "They'd be a great help too."

"Arrangements can be made to bring them to Delaya," Vader said.

"That would be wonderful," Padmé said with a smile.

Vader nodded, pleased that things were falling into place. Yet, he realized that he had a long way to go. *I still need to find a way to deal with Sidious*, he reminded himself.

"I will leave the details to the two of you," he said, standing up. "I must return to the bridge."

"Stay for dinner, Daddy," Leia said, taking his hand in hers. "Please?"

Vader looked down at his young daughter, wishing more than anything that he could do something as simple as sharing a meal with his family. "I'm afraid that isn't possible, little one; I am needed on the bridge," he said, taking her small face in his hand. 'But thank you for the invitation.' He looked up at Padmé. "I shall return soon," he told her.

Padmé nodded. "Okay," she said, standing up to walk him to the door. As he reached the doorway, he felt her take his hand. He turned and looked down at her in surprise.

"Thank you for what you did for Luke," she said looking up to him. "You've made him so happy."

Vader nodded. "I was glad to do it," he replied. "They are so beautiful, Padmé, so precious. I have already placed a protective shield around all of you; the Force shall protect you from the emperor's detection."

Padmé smiled. "Thank you," she said. "But I'm worried about you, Anakin. I hate the thought of him abusing you and patronizing you," she said with a frown.

Vader lifted his other hand to her face. He touched her face tentatively, half expecting her to recoil under his touch. But she did not. “Do not worry, Padmé,” he told her. “I will not let him win, never again.”

She nodded. “I know you won’t,” she said.

He looked at her for a moment longer, and then turned and left.

Organa had watched the exchange, not hearing the words, but seeing the tenderness Vader had imparted to his wife. *Incredible*, he thought. *Who ever would have imagined this could happen??*

Padmé returned to where Organa was seated and sat down. “So, let’s get down to it.”

Vader reached the bridge, forcing himself to focus on his duties there.

“The report you ordered, sir.”

Vader turned to the captain and took the data pad, examining it briefly. There had been reports of a renegade Jedi in the Garos System. Sidious had been quite explicit in his orders with regards to the Jedi— they must all be destroyed, down to the last man, woman and youngling. *If I don’t at least investigate this, Sidious’ wrath will be great indeed.*

“Your orders, sir?”

“We shall head for the Garos System as soon as we deliver our delegates to their respective planets,” he said. “Until then, maintain orbit.”

“Yes sir,” the officer replied. “Oh, and sir, the emperor commands you to make contact with him.”

Vader nodded his understanding, his body tensing at the thought of talking to his master. “I will go now,” he said. “You have the bridge, captain.”

Vader walked through the corridors of the *Exactor*, his mind focused on the conversation he was about to have with the emperor. *He will never find you, Padmé, never.*

He entered the great hall where a large holographic platform had been set up specifically to communicate with the galactic emperor. His mind was set, the mental barriers firmly in place as he knelt down to wait for his master’s image to appear. He did not have to wait long before the enormous holographic image of Sidious appeared.

“What is thy bidding, my master?” Vader said, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“What is the situation on Alderaan?” Palpatine asked without preamble. “Have you had the discussion with the Viceroy that I requested?”

Requested? Don’t you mean ordered?? Damn it, I’d forgotten about that, Vader thought to himself. Palpatine was incredibly paranoid, and as such saw spies and traitors at every turn. He had not trusted Bail Organa since his involvement in the Delegation of 2000. Palpatine had ordered Vader to let the Viceroy know in no uncertain terms that he was considered an enemy of the emperor, and that he and his entire household were being watched closely.

Vader, of course, had had no such conversation with Organa; and Palpatine knew just by the Dark Lord's silence that he had not.

"I have not yet had the opportunity," Vader replied at last. "But I assure you that..."

"This is not the first time that you have disregarded my orders, Lord Vader," spat Sidious. "You seem to think that you have a choice in these matters; I assure you that you do not!" Sidious punctuated his comment with a blast of Sith lightening directed at Vader's spine. Vader was engulfed in pain, crippling pain, and he fell forward, bracing himself with one hand.

"I am... sorry, my master," he gasped as the attack abated momentarily. "I will not fail you again..."

"See to it that you do not," Sidious replied, sending another blast through Vader's body, carefully avoiding the electronic circuitry of his breathing apparatus. While he took great pleasure in punishing his servant, he still needed him nonetheless. Vader's second hand hit the floor, as he knelt before the fading image of his master as a slave would kneel before his owner. He squeezed his eyes tightly, willing the pain away. Slowly he rose to his feet, the pain still filling him. He made his way out of the room and to the nearest turbo lift. Once inside, he slumped against the wall, fighting for control. *I did it*, he thought triumphantly, despite his enormous pain. *I kept them protected... I kept them hidden...* If it took ten times the pain, he knew he would endure if it meant keeping those he loved safe.

Vader had almost made it back to Padmé's quarters when he was met in the corridor by Bail Organa.

"I need to go over a few things with you," Organa said as Vader reached him. "Padmé and I have...." He stopped as he saw Vader brace himself with one hand against the bulk head, obviously in great pain.

"What happened?" Organa asked, putting an arm around the Dark Lord's waist.

"The... emperor..." Vader managed to say. "He is displeased...."

Organa frowned as he struggled to help the faltering Sith Lord down the corridor. When they reached Padmé's quarters, he helped Vader inside. Padmé had just settled the kids down to bed when she saw Organa enter the room with Vader in tow.

"Ani!" she cried, running over to two men. "What happened??"

Organa sat Vader down on the sofa. "I don't know," he panted. "Something to do with the emperor I think."

Vader sat and leaned back, closing his eyes and trying to master his pain.

"What did he do to you?" Padmé demanded. "What did he do, Anakin?"

Vader opened his eyes and looked at his wife, her concern for him evident in her eyes. "He is angry with me," he replied. "He... punished me..."

Padmé felt the anger welling up within her at the thought of Palpatine. "What did he do?" she asked her voice a little more calm.

“Sith lightning,” Vader replied simply.

Padmé shook her head, the anger making tears spring to her eyes. “We won’t let him win, Anakin,” she said, taking his hand. “We will destroy him; somehow we will destroy him and end his thrall on you forever.”

Vader squeezed his wife’s hand. “Yes, my angel, we will.”

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

"I think this latest incident with the emperor only serves to underscore our need to get you away from here," Organa said to Padmé. "He is a sadistic monster who would stop at nothing to destroy every member of this family."

Padmé nodded, hearing his words, but still concerned for her husband. It infuriated her to see him in such pain, inflicted by the monster he called his master.

"I agree with the Viceroy," Vader said. "You and the children must hide, and soon."

Padmé frowned, not liking where he was going with this. "Wait a minute; you're coming with us, aren't you? You are in as much danger from that maniac as we are, Anakin. Isn't what he did to you today proof of that??"

"I cannot simply disappear, Padmé," he replied. "That would rouse his suspicions. I have no intention of letting you and the children fend for yourselves in isolation; I will join you, but it must be at the proper time, otherwise Palpatine will suspect that something is going on."

Organa nodded. "I agree," he said. "The emperor is already so suspicious, it wouldn't take much for him to suspect that there is something afoot. Perhaps you can fake your death, just as Padmé did five years ago."

Vader nodded. "That might work," he replied. "But even if I do that, it has to be in a way that is believable. I'm a Sith; we are not easily killed, Viceroy."

"I realize that," Organa countered. "But you're not immortal, Vader. Surely between the three of us we can think of a way to make it look like you've perished; perhaps in a crash, or..."

"Anakin is the best pilot in the galaxy," Padmé cut in. "No one would believe that."

Vader looked at his wife, a smile under his mask. "Well, perhaps under the right circumstances they might," he replied.

"Such as?" Padmé asked.

"An attack," suggested Organa. "There are plenty of people around who would like to see Darth Vader dead; perhaps an ambush from the Rebel Alliance."

"But how would they know where he is?" Padmé asked. "And what would they be doing in this sector if they are trying to avoid detection from the Empire?"

"You'd be surprised where you'd find Rebel sympathizers, Padmé," Vader said matter-of-factly. "Believe me. Part of my assignment this past five years is to seek them out, and I can tell you, they are everywhere. The idea is a sound one," he concluded.

Organa nodded, finding it strange to hear Darth Vader speak of the Rebels so casually. *Ironic indeed that the existence of this alliance may serve to help its greatest enemy...*

"I will be visiting the Garos System very soon," Vader continued. "Perhaps the unfortunate accident could occur while I'm on that mission."

"That would work," Organa said. "It's pretty far from the Core, probably not too closely watched by the Empire."

Vader nodded. "Yes, you're right. We'll make this work, Padmé, don't worry. You and the children will not be there alone for long, I promise."

"I hope not, Anakin," she replied quietly, trying to shake a growing feeling of unease.

"If it would make you feel better, I will have Padmé and the twins escorted to Delaya and keep a small contingent of guards there to keep an eye on things," Organa suggested. "Until you can join her there."

Vader nodded. "That is a good idea," he said. 'And I know it would make me feel better about sending you on alone,' he said to Padmé. "Knowing that you are under the protection of the Viceroy's personal guard."

Padmé sighed. "I suppose that is what we should do, then," she said at last.

"Good," Organa said, standing up. "So it's settled then. I will arrange for your escort this very evening, Padmé, and can have you and the twins taken to Delaya first thing tomorrow morning if you wish."

Padmé looked back at Vader, and although she could not see his face, she knew that he felt the same way about their impending separation. "Thank you, Bail," she said softly. "I appreciate all your help."

Bail Organa returned to the planet surface within the hour, leaving Vader alone with his wife.

"What takes you to the Garos System?" she asked him.

Vader hesitated, not knowing what to tell her. His true reasons for going were not ones he wished to share with her, for he knew they would only upset and horrify her. *You owe her the truth, after everything you've done, you owe her at least that much.*

"There have been reports of a renegade Jedi in the vicinity," he replied, looking away from her. "I am going there to... investigate."

Padmé felt a chill go up her spine, reminding her that despite the devotion he demonstrated to her and their children, he was still very much a Dark Lord of the Sith.

"Investigate? Or eliminate?" she asked pointedly.

Vader turned back to her. "Padmé, you know the position I'm in," he replied. "What would the emperor think if all of a sudden I stopped doing my job? Don't you think he would suspect something?"

Padmé hated to admit it, but she knew he was right. "Yes, I suppose he would," she admitted. "But still..."

Padmé was interrupted by a small child running into the room. It was Luke.

"What is it, Luke?" Padmé asked as he ran into her embrace. "You're trembling!"

"I had a bad dream," Luke said, burying his face against her shoulder.

Padmé stroked the boy's hair gently. "It's okay, Luke; it was only a dream."

Don't be so sure, Padmé, Vader reflected, remembering the many occasion he'd suffered bad dreams in his youth, dreams which often turned out to be portents of the future.

"What was it about, son?" Vader asked.

Luke looked up and over to his father. "It was about you," he said softly. "I saw you, Daddy, I saw you being hurt, hurt bad."

Padmé looked over at Vader, both of them realizing the same thing; Luke had witnessed what his father had just suffered. It astounded them both. Obviously Luke's connection to his father was truly strong, only after such a short time.

Vader sighed deeply, and held his hands out to the boy. Luke came to his father at once.

"I'm fine, Luke," Vader said, pulling his son onto his lap. "You needn't worry, son. I'm just fine."

Luke examined his father's mask closely, as though trying to discern if he were telling the truth. "I was scared that you would die," he told him solemnly. "I don't want you to die, Daddy."

Vader did not know how to respond to his son's words, or to the outpouring of love he felt emanating from the small boy. He never imagined that he could feel so connected to another human being. "I'm not going to die, Luke," he replied at last. "I'm going to be around for a long time to protect you, your sister and your mother. Do you hear me?"

Luke nodded, believing his father's words.

"Good," Vader said. "Think you can sleep now?"

Luke nodded again, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"Okay then," Vader said. 'Let's get you back in bed.' He picked his son up in his arms and carried him back into the bedroom, where Leia slept peacefully. Vader gently lay Luke down in the bed beside his sister and pulled the covers up over him, and tucked Spotty into the crook of the boy's arm. "Sweet dreams this time, okay?" he said.

Luke nodded a smile on his face. "Goodnight, Daddy," he said, reaching his hands up to frame Vader's mask. To Vader's utter astonishment, Luke planted a kiss on the tip of his metallic nose, and then rolled over and closed his eyes. Vader straightened up, ignoring the pain he felt shooting through his back as he did so, and simply watched his children as they slept.

"Is he asleep?" Padme asked as Vader returned to the sitting room.

Vader nodded. "Yes," he replied. "He is such a remarkable child, Padmé."

Padmé smiled. “Yes, he is,” she agreed. ‘Just like his father was.’ She watched him as he walked across the room. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he replied, a little too quickly. “Nothing a little sleep won’t help. That is if I’m lucky to get any.”

“How do you sleep?” she asked, the curiosity getting the better of it. “I mean, you obviously cannot remove that breathing apparatus,” she added.

“I can only when I’m in my meditation chamber,” he told her. “I had it built so I could feel human, at least on occasion,” he told her.

“You can take off your mask??” she asked in surprise.

Vader nodded. “Yes, it is the only place I am able to breathe unaided for any more than a short span of time.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I know this must be so difficult for you to talk about,” she added.

“You are my wife, Padme,” he replied. “You can ask me anything. I will even show you the chamber if you wish.”

“I’d like to see it,” she replied. *I’d like to see you. I need to see you.*

“There is a passage way that leads to my quarters,” he said, walking over to the computer screen and showing her its location on a schematics map. “It would be prudent if you were not seen by anyone.”

“Yes, I agree,” she said, looking at the map. She felt excited, and yet a great sense of trepidation too. As much as she longed to see the face of her Anakin, would he allow her to? Or would it be too difficult for him to show her the ravages left by the fires of Mustafar?

“Then I will see you later on,” he said, looking up at her. “If you’re sure you want to do this.”

Padme nodded. “I’m sure,” she said. “I want to know everything I can about your life, Anakin. Everything.”

Vader nodded. “Very well,” he said, walking to the exit, trying not to show his anxiety. “And so you shall.”

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

What was I thinking?? She will be horrified when she sees the way you must live... what if she asks to see your face? What then? Vader walked along, growing more apprehensive with each step.

"You, protocol droid," he said to a passing droid.

"Yes, how might I serve you, Lord Vader?" it asked.

"Report to the dignitary's quarters at once," Vader ordered. "The Senator requires someone to watch her children while she takes a tour of the ship."

"I shall report there at once, sir," the droid responded, shuffling off.

Vader continued on his way, his nervousness not abating the closer he got to his personal quarters.

"Lord Vader asked me to report to you, m'am. I understand you require someone to mind your children."

Padmé smiled. *He still thinks of everything*, she reflected. "Thank you," she replied. "they are asleep now, so you won't have much to do I'm afraid."

"I understand, milady."

Padmé walked into the fresher to fix her hair. She looked at herself in the mirror, trying to decide if she ought to take out her braid, or leave it in. She tried to deny how nervous she felt at the prospect of seeing where Anakin spent his private time. *Will he allow me to see his face? Or will he be too self-conscious, too ashamed...*

Pulling her braid apart, Padmé tried to put her fears aside, her fears of what she would see. From what Obi-Wan had said, Anakin's injuries had been massive; the thought of seeing him and witnessing the extent of those injuries was daunting and more than a little unnerving. *No matter what, he's still Anakin*; she resolved as she brushed out her long hair and arranged it around her shoulders. *Ani always loved it loose...* She left the fresher, picked up the dark green cloak from the end of her bed, and, after kissing each of her sleeping children, left the room.

Vader paced in his quarters, hands clasped behind his back. *She's changed her mind... she isn't coming... she cannot face this nightmare that is my life... Fool!!* he admonished himself bitterly. *What makes you think she'd truly want to know? Want to see the monster you have become?*

Vader turned his head as he heard doors opening. *She is here...* He walked to meet her, excitement and trepidation filling him both in equal measure.

"Good evening," he said when he reached her.

“Hello,” she said, lowering her hood. She smiled, nervous energy filling her all of a sudden. “Thank you for sending the droid to watch the children.”

“You’re welcome,” Vader replied, taking her cloak from her shoulders. “Protocol droids do come in handy on occasion,” he commented wryly.

Padmé laughed. “Well, Threepio seems to think the entire household would fall apart without him to hold it together.”

Vader could not help but smile at this comment, remembering the droid well. “I can imagine,” he said.

“He is good with the children though,” Padmé continued, looking around the room briefly. “Even though Leia makes fun of him mercilessly.”

Vader actually laughed at this comment, something he had not done in so very long. “Does she??”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, and Artoo only encourages her,” she continued. “And you know Threepio, so long suffering, so persecuted.”

Vader nodded. “Yes, I remember that well,” he said. “I think I over did it with the personality when I created that droid.”

Padmé smiled. “Maybe so,” she conceded. She couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer, and walked further into the room. ‘So this is where you spend your time when you’re not on the bridge,’ she said, looking around. She stopped at the sight of the meditation chamber. “Is that the chamber you were telling me about?”

Vader nodded. He watched as Padmé approached the chamber which stood open. Tentatively she looked inside, amazed by the intricacy of the controls, the complexity of the design. She looked back at Vader. “So how does it work?” she asked.

Vader stepped over to stand beside her. “Well, this is where I sit,” he said, pointing to the seat in the middle of the chamber. ‘And up there,’ he said, pointing to a mechanical claw suspended from the top of the chamber, “is the device that removes my mask and helmet. While I’m in here, I can breathe on my own; the atmosphere is hyper-oxygenated.”

“So this is where you sleep? How long are you able to be in here without your mask?” she asked.

“Sleep isn’t something I get a lot of anymore,” he replied. *And what little sleep I do get is full of your face...* “But I can exist in here for several hours without the use of my mask.”

Padmé nodded, fascinated and yet heart broken to see the great lengths he needed to go to simply to sleep, something that most people took for granted.

“So I suppose that means you need to be inside with the chamber closed for it to work properly,” she observed.

He nodded. “I am able to keep it open for short periods of time, but not for long. Fifteen minutes tops before the atmosphere is compromised.”

"I see," she said. She hesitated before asking what was foremost on her mind, not sure how he would react. 'I want to see your face, Anakin,' she said, turning to him. "Will you let me?"

Vader turned to her, not surprised by the question, but unnerved by it all the same. "I don't know," he said hesitantly. "I'm not sure you'll want to, Padmé. I'm not the man you remember."

"I know you don't look the same," she said. "But you are the same man, Anakin. The outside doesn't matter much to me."

Vader sighed. "You may change your mind when you see me, Padmé," he replied. "But I will show you, if that is what you truly want."

"It is," she replied.

"Very well," he responded, stepping into the chamber.

Vader sat down, his apprehension rising. He activated the mechanism that controlled the claw above his head, and it slowly began its descent.

Padmé watched as the claw took a hold of the helmet, encircling it. She heard the mechanism release the mask from the neck brace, and watched as it slowly retracted, lifting the mask and the helmet with it.

The moment their eyes met Padmé felt her strength nearly give way, but she remained strong and held his gaze. His beautiful golden locks were gone, leaving him bald. He was so pale, his once uncommonly handsome face marred with vicious scars. But his eyes, they were the same, they had not changed. *Those are the eyes of the man I love*, she thought, her heart aching at the sight of his face. She smiled at him, and, without a moment's hesitation, brought her hands to his face.

Vader closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the sensation of her touch upon his skin. It had been five years since he'd had any human contact at all, *five long years*.

Gently Padmé caressed the battered face of her Anakin, over his brows, down the sides of his face, just being able to touch him again after so long leaving her shaken and emotional. Vader opened his eyes, shocked at her reaction. *How can she bear to look at me, much less touch me??*

"I'm sorry, Padmé," he said at last, his voice weak without the voice enunciator. "So sorry I look this way," he said his voice barely audible.

She shook her head, her eyes brilliant with tears. "Don't," she said. "Please. This wasn't your doing."

"But it was," he replied. "I didn't listen to you, didn't listen to anyone but the monster who used me for his own ends. I deserve this, Padmé...after what I did to you, I deserve..."

She stopped him with a finger over his lips. "Stop," she said. "No one deserves what you have suffered, Anakin. No one."

He shook his head. "How can you be so forgiving, Padmé?" he asked incredulously. "How can you bear to look at me after the way I betrayed you? I don't deserve your compassion. I don't deserve to have you and our children in my life after the way I turned on you..."

Vader's emotions started to break through the meticulously built wall he had erected around himself.

"Forgive me, Padmé," he said as hot tears slid down his shattered visage.

Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck as the both wept, their tears a mix of sadness, of regret; but also of joyful reunion, of love, of forgiveness. Padmé pulled back and planted a tender kiss on his brow, and then another on one cheek, and then the other. She looked into his eyes, seeing there the same emotions reflected that she herself felt. "I've missed you so much," she whispered as her tears continued to stream down her face.

Vader lifted his hands to her face, holding it tenderly, reverently. "I've been an empty shell without you," he told her, his voice raspy as his oxygen supply started to wane. She noticed the change at once, and frowned. 'Are you alright?' she asked. "Maybe it's time to replace the mask," she suggested wistfully.

"I'm afraid so," he replied. Padmé stepped away, and allowed him to activate the mechanical claw once again. She watched as it returned the mask and helmet, stealing him away from her once again. Once it was in place, Vader stood and joined her outside the pod.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," she told him. "I know that wasn't easy for you."

"You made it much easier than I expected," he told her, taking her hand. "Thank you, Padmé. Thank you for not hating what I have become."

Padmé shook her head. "You are still the Ani I love," she said. "Even though you don't realize it yet, even if you won't admit it even to yourself. That hasn't changed."

Vader stood, scarcely able to believe his ears. "My angel," he said, touching her face lightly with his other hand. "My life has meaning again now that you have come back to me."

Vader stood at the door where Padmé had just exited, his hand leaning against the door. The brief contact they'd shared was more than he ever imagined he could hope for in his life time; and yet, it had served to augment the longing he already felt for her, deepening his desire for her. He clenched his fist in frustration as the reality of his situation crashed down around him, reminding him all too keenly of his physical limitations. With monumental anger and frustration, he slammed his fist into the bulkhead, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. Vader turned and stalked away from the door, returning to his pod once again where he was sure to spend a restless night.

Padmé managed to control her emotions long enough to reach her quarters. Once there, she quickly dismissed the droid, and sat down on the sofa. Face in her hands, she wept, giving full vent to the anguish and crushing sorrow that filled her heart. *My poor Ani*, she thought desolately. *How you have suffered!!*

Through her sorrow an idea pushed its way through, one that she had tried to ignore, but would not be ignored. *He can be helped... his injuries can be repaired... there has to be a way... and I will find it, not matter how long it takes me, I **will** find a way...*

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Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Imperial City-Coruscant

Emperor Palpatine stood amid the fawning sycophants he loved to surround himself with, enjoying an after theater aperitif and he compliments of his adoring subjects. The play had been mediocre in his opinion; he'd fought hard to stifle to his yawns through the excruciatingly long ordeal.

As he stood there, he was struck with a dark ripple in the Force. Narrowing his yellow eyes, he concentrated on its source, smiling when he determined whence it had come. *It seems Lord Vader is a particularly dark mood tonight*, Palpatine reflected. The Dark Lord felt a tumultuous swirl of dark emotions surrounding his young apprentice: anger, frustration, pain.....and one he had not expected, lust. *No doubt dreaming of his dearly departed wife again*, Palpatine thought, disgusted at the weakness of his apprentice. *Yet, if these fruitless desires serve to drive him deeper into the abyss of Darkness, then so much the better.*

Palpatine turned his thoughts away from Vader and back to the party at hand.

Darth Vader arrived at the Padmé's quarters early the next morning. Organa was already there, along with a young officer in his service, Captain Raymus Antilles. Vader felt a surge of jealousy as he saw Organa sitting beside Padmé, his hand on her arm in a gesture of protectiveness. He had to fight the urge to send the man across the room for daring to touch his wife, reminding himself that Organa was helping them, that he was an ally, not an enemy.

Padmé looked up when she heard Vader in the room. She smiled at him. "Good morning," she said.

Vader nodded in response. "Good morning," he replied. "I hope you slept well."

Padmé shrugged. "Not too well I'm afraid," she admitted, "you?"

"It has been a long time since I slept well, Padmé," he replied, sitting down across from her and Organa. "Where are the children?"

"Getting dressed," Padmé replied. "They are excited about going to Delaya," she told him. "But they don't realize that you're not coming with us, Anakin."

"It cannot be helped, Padmé," Vader responded. "Besides, it will be for a short time only."

She nodded, knowing that the children would be very upset to have to say goodbye to their father.

"If there is nothing else, I will take your bags to the ship, my lady," Antilles said, moving to the door.

"Thank you Captain," Padmé replied. "We'll be along shortly."

Antilles left the three of them and headed off for the Tantive IV which was moored in the belly of the star destroyer.

"There is something I haven't told you," Organa said, turning to Vader. "Obi-Wan Kenobi contacted me just before you arrived at my home."

Vader frowned under his mask, and turned to his wife. "What did he want? Or do I even need to ask?" he said.

"He suspected that Padmé was gone to look for you, and was looking for my help," Organa responded. 'He doesn't think you're capable of changing,' he added. "And fully expects you to bring harm to Padmé and the children."

"Obi-Wan is the reason Anakin and I have spent the past five years apart," Padmé retorted hotly. "He told me that Anakin had died on Mustafar, and has been lying ever since."

"What did you tell Kenobi?" Vader asked Organa.

"I told him that if I learned anything I would contact him," he replied. "But that was before I realized that things were not as any of us expected them to be."

"And now that you know that Anakin is not going to harm any of us?" Padmé asked. "What will you tell him now?"

"Nothing," Organa replied. "I will tell him nothing. He is bent on finding you though, Padmé; whether or not I help him to do so."

Vader frowned under his mask, a dark surge of anger flashing through him. "I will deal with Kenobi in good time," he pronounced ominously. "He will regret it if he tries to interfere with my family again."

Padmé did not like the sound of his words, for he sounded too much like the Darth Vader who had terrorized the galaxy for five years. It was as though he were two men now; the fearsome, ruthless Sith Lord and the loving, protective father and husband. *How can the two be reconciled without destroying him utterly?*

Organa stood up. "I will see to the last minute arrangements," he said, realizing that Vader and Padmé no doubt wanted some time alone together before their separation.

Vader stood up too. "Thank you Viceroy for everything you are doing to help us," he said. "You have my gratitude."

"You're welcome," he said, holding his hand out to Vader. "I will keep your family safe until you return."

Vader nodded, shaking Organa's hand. "Thank you," he said.

Organa nodded, and then left the room, just as the twins made their entrance. They ran to their parents, excited at the prospect of their new home.

"Isn't it exciting, Daddy?" Leia asked as Vader picked her up. "We will be living in the middle of a forest, just like our old house!"

Vader nodded. "Its sounds beautiful," he said. "I look forward to seeing it."

“Mommy said we’re going this morning,” Luke told his father. “After breakfast.”

Vader sighed, looking back at Padmé. “Well, children, I won’t be coming with you today,” he told them, hating the disappointed looks on their faces.

“Why not??” Leia demanded her indignation evident in the set of her shoulders.

“I have some work to do first,” he told his daughter and son. “But I will join you in a few days. It won’t be long, children. I promise.”

“Daddy is right,” Padmé said. “We’ll be together soon. Right now I want you two to eat your breakfast. It’s on the table right now.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Leia replied, the tone of disappointment not leaving her voice. The twins walked over to the table and sat down to eat their breakfast. When they were out of earshot, Vader turned to Padmé.

“I meant what I said, Padmé,” he told her. “I won’t allow Kenobi to come between us again.”

Padmé made no reply, his serious tone unnerving her. “He doesn’t understand the bond between us, Anakin; I don’t think he ever did.”

Vader shook his head. “No one did, Padmé,” he said, taking her hands in his. ‘I dreamed of you all night, Padmé,’ he told her, “just as I have so many nights over the past five years.”

Padmé smiled. “I dreamed of you many times too,” she told him. “I can’t tell you how much it meant to see your face again, Ani.”

“Not exactly the face you remember, though,” he replied somberly.

Padmé heard the pain behind his words, and remembered the pain in his eyes, the immeasurable pain.

“Anakin, have you ever thought that perhaps your injuries could be repaired?” she asked. “If Palpatine lied about my death, then surely it’s possible he lied about your injuries too. Have you ever considered that?”

Vader remained silent for a moment, her words evoking a tumult of feelings within him. “No, I have not,” he replied at last. “I believed him, just as I believed everything else he told me, Padmé. Besides, I never considered that I was worthy of being healed, not after what I did to you. I’ve always looked upon these injuries as my punishment.”

Padmé frowned and shook her head, her hatred for Palpatine growing each moment. “But now that you know he lied about me, now that you know what truly happened, what do you think now? Don’t you think it’s at least worth investigating?”

Vader remained silent for a moment as he considered his wife’s words. *Think of what it would mean to be whole again... no more mask... no more living as half a man... I could live my life normally, I could kiss my children goodnight, touch my wife in the way I have longed to for so long...*

“Yes, I do,” he replied at last. “But promise me one thing, Padmé.”

“What is that?”

“That you don’t place too much hope on this,” he replied. “It may be that there is no way to repair my injuries, and I may very well have to exist like this for the rest of my life.”

Padmé nodded, not wishing to think of that as being a possibility. “I promise,” she replied. “But think of what it would it would mean, Ani. We could live a normal life, you and I. We could even have more children.”

Vader tried not to let her words get his hopes up, but it was difficult not to. The thought of living a normal life, of spending each night with her, making love to her, having more children with her, was like a dream to him. *Was it possible??*

“Nothing would make me happier,” he said at last. “I just don’t want you to pin your hopes on this, Padmé. Palpatine could have been telling the truth, as unlikely as that is.”

Padmé shook her head. “I don’t believe it,” she said. “If the technology to create clones exists, then surely your injuries can be fixed with similar technology.”

“Surely you don’t mean cloning,” he said.

“No, not cloning,” she replied. “Organic replication, from your own cells,” she replied. “I remember hearing about it when I was still a senator. I’m sure the technology has been perfected by now.”

Vader nodded. “It sounds promising,” he admitted.

“I will begin investigating it as soon as I ready Delaya,” she told him. “I won’t stop until I find the answer, Ani, because I know it’s out there.”

“All done!” Leia announced as she and Luke rejoined their parents. “Are we going soon, Mommy?”

“I’m afraid so, Leia,” Padmé replied. “Our bags are already on the ship. Time to say goodbye to your father.”

Vader sat down on the sofa as the twins came over to him, climbing onto his lap as soon as they reached him.

“I will be joining you very soon,” he told them, putting an arm around each of them. “But in the meantime, you be good, alright? Promise me you’ll help your mother.”

“We promise,” Luke said. “Don’t we Leia?”

Leia nodded, her eyes filling with tears. “I want you to come with us,” she said, her bottom lip pushing out ever so slightly. “It’s not fair.”

Vader stroked her dark hair gently. “I know it doesn’t seem that way,” he told her gently. “But sometimes we must do things that seem unfair, Leia. You will understand when you are older.”

Leia frowned, willing herself not to cry in front of her father, not wanting him to think her a baby. “Yes, Daddy,” she said quietly.

The door slid open, and Bail Organa entered the room. “Are well all set?” he asked.

Padmé nodded, a lump forming in her throat all of a sudden. *Don't be foolish, you'll see him in a few days... a week tops...*

Vader embraced his children. "I love you both, very much," he said, the emotions welling up within him.

"I love you Daddy," they told him, almost in unison as they hugged him as closely as possible.

"Come along, children," Bail said, holding a hand out to each of them. "Let's go."

Luke and Leia left their father and joined Organa, turning to look at Vader once more before leaving the room with the Viceroy. When they'd left, Vader stood up to face his wife.

"We won't be apart long, Padmé," he said, taking her by the arms. "I promise you."

Padmé nodded, trying to master her tears. "I know," she said. "I just hate to say goodbye, not after we just found one another again."

He pulled her close, as close as he could; wishing he could smell the fragrance of her hair again, feel the softness of her skin. *Soon, very soon*, he told himself. *We will be together once again.*

"Goodbye, my angel," he said, holding her face in his hands. "I love you."

That was all it took for Padmé's tears to flow. "I love you too," she whispered. "Please come back to us soon."

And then she was gone. Vader stood in the empty quarters, where mere moments ago he had basked in the love of his family. And now they were gone. *But this time it is temporary*, he told himself. *This time we will find one another again, and it won't be after five years this time.*

Mustering the iron control over his emotions that he'd perfected over the past five years, Vader left the quarters, the Sith Lord once again.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Darth Vader arrived at the bridge just in time to see the Tantive IV moving out away from the great star destroyer. *Take good care of my family, Organa*, he thought to himself. *Or you will pay dearly, that I promise you.*

“Captain, lay in a course for the Garos System,” Vader ordered. “Maximum velocity.”

“Yes sir,” Captain Phipps replied at once, relaying the order to the bridge’s helmsman.

Vader stood, hands folded over his chest, watching as the planet Alderaan grew smaller in the view screen. It wasn’t long before it disappeared altogether, as the *Exactor* made the jump into hyperspace.

Vader tried to focus on the mission at hand, but his mind was too occupied with thoughts of his children, of his wife. Their last conversation still echoed in his mind, the suggestions she had made still very present in his thoughts. *Was there a chance that what she had said could happen? Was it possible that he could be made whole again??*

Vader reflected over the myriad of lies his master had told him over the past twenty years; what would stop him from lying about this too? Until now Vader had never questioned his physical condition; as he had told Padmé, he considered his injuries to be just punishment for all that he had done to her. *But she was alive, she was well, and so were the children... these facts changed everything.* There was no doubt that Palpatine considered Darth Vader to be more menacing as a cyborg than as fully human; the fact that his face was hidden alone made him terrifying. Was this the reason the emperor had lied about his injuries? Simply to retain the menacing specter of Darth Vader as his henchman? Or was there a more insidious reason?

To deprive Vader of his humanity would keep him forever mired in the misery and pain that had claimed him on Mustafar, and would serve forever as a reminder of all that he had lost on that fateful day. Pain, physical and emotional, were a way of life for Darth Vader, and Palpatine knew this. Pain kept him in line, kept him subservient, and kept his hold on the Dark Side firm.

The more Vader pondered it, the angrier he became. *You made me what I am, my master*, he thought darkly, *as surely as if it had been you who had pushed me into the fiery hells of Mustafar.* He had lied, of that Vader had no doubt. Padmé was right; which meant that there was hope.

It had been so long since Vader had felt anything akin to hope that it felt strange and foreign to him. Yet, he could not deny it; there was hope that his injuries could be repaired, hope that he could become fully human again. *And when I do, you will regret having used me the way you have, Sidious*, he thought as the star destroyer raced its way to the Garos System. *You will pay for all that you have done, I promise you that my master.*

Padmé and Bail Organa entered the cottage a few hours later. Luke and Leia each held one of their mother's hands, excited at the prospect of their new home. However, when they entered the house, their excitement soon turned to dismay.

"Oh my," Padmé said, looking around at the dirty, disheveled mess that surrounded them.

"I had no idea this place was this bad," Organa said more than a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Padmé. This place is awful."

"Nothing some hard work and a little elbow grease won't clean up," she said, trying not to let the surroundings get her down. "Let's look around, kids." She and the twins walked around throughout the large house, finding it was well furnished, despite the thick layer of dust everywhere. On the second floor they found a number of small bedrooms as well as two refreshers.

"This will be perfect," Padmé told Organa as they met down on the main floor again. "It will take some work to get it cleaned up, but it will be lovely when it's finished."

"I've sent a man to retrieve the droids," he told her. "They should be here by night fall. Antilles brought a number of men along as well; they can help out."

"Thank you, Bail," she replied. "I appreciate all this, truly I do. I just hope that... you did tell them not to speak to anyone about what they were doing, didn't you?" she asked. "If Obi-Wan gets wind of what they are doing, he will surely be able to find us. He's very clever."

Organa nodded. "Yes, I told him to avoid contact with Kenobi at all costs," he replied. "Still, if Kenobi is determined to find you, Padmé, he will. He's a Jedi Knight, remember."

"I know," Padmé said, frowning. "I hate to think of what would happen if he and Anakin encountered one another right now."

"I agree," Organa replied. "While he has changed a lot, Vader is still a Sith, Padmé. You do realize that don't you?"

"Yes, I realize that," she replied quietly. "But you've seen with your own eyes the affect his children have on him, Bail. If anyone can bring out the Anakin Skywalker that I know is still inside of him, they can."

Organa nodded. "Don't underestimate your influence, Padmé. As much as he loves his children, his adoration for you is quite obvious. Your belief in his humanity will destroy Vader, Padmé, that and your unconditional love."

Padmé smiled. "I'm glad that you can see that there is good in him, Bail; Obi-Wan refuses to acknowledge that there could be even a shred of humanity left in him."

"Until I saw him in that toy store, I didn't see it, Padmé," Organa admitted. "I thought he was just trying to trap me somehow by asking me to help you. But the single-mindedness with which he searched for that teddy bear for Luke convinced me; only a father who adores his child would take such pains to find a toy."

"Yes, you're right," she replied. "He adores his children, and they adore him. No one who was completely evil could evoke such feelings; surely Obi-wan would understand that."

Organa sighed. "I'd like to think so, Padmé," he replied. "But I can't say for sure. I think it's best that he not know where you are, at least until you can find a way to convince him that Vader is not the same man he thinks he knows."

"Yes, I agree," Padmé said. She sighed, looking around the room again. 'Well, I suppose it's time to get busy,' she said, removing her cloak. "Luke, Leia!" she called. "Come here children. It's time we got busy."

Hannas II — The Outer Rim

"You're here to take the droids? On whose authority? How do I know that you're telling me the truth?" Dormé asked suspiciously.

"I assure you, miss, that you can trust us," one of the guards replied. "We have been sent by Bail Organa himself."

Bail Organa?? "Does this have something to do with Senator Amidala?" she asked warily, worrying that she was walking into a trap.

"Senator Padmé is under the protective custody of the Viceroy," another of the guards spoke up. "Along with her children. We are simply here to gather her droids, as well as her and the twins' personal belongings."

Oh, thank the gods that she didn't go through with it!! Dormé thought with relief. *She saw reason at last... Obi-Wan will be so relieved!!*

"In that case, let me help you pack some things for them," she said at last.

The Garos System was in the Outer Rim, in a part of the galaxy that the Empire had little interest in. Until now. The Jedi were Public Enemy Number One in the eyes of the emperor, and every measure was to be taken to eliminate their corruptive influence from the galaxy completely.

"Do we have any information on the renegade Jedi?" Vader asked his second in command as they drew closer to the Outer Rim. 'His name at least?'

"Yes sir, we have a name," Captain Phipps replied. "We don't actually know if the fugitive is male or female, however. The name is," he continued, picking up a data pad to read the name. "Nejaa Halcyon."

Nejaa Halcyon... one of the few masters who treated me like an equal when I was still a padawan... Vader remembered the name well, having served with Halcyon on the mission that had earned him his knighthood. *And now I must hunt him down and destroy him...*

"Halcyon is male," he said at last. "As soon as we drop from hyperspace, proceed directly to the planet of his last known whereabouts."

"Yes, my lord."

By nightfall, the cottage was looking considerably better. Luke and Leia had collapsed into bed, exhausted by the day's events. Bail Organa had departed earlier, leaving a small detachment of guards to watch over the house and its occupants.

"Mistress Padmé, Miss Dormé, is there anything I can get either of you?" Threepio asked as he shuffled into the large sun room where Padmé and Dormé sat sipping a cup of tea.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “It’s so good to have you here, Threepio. I know the twins will be delighted to see you when they wake up.”

Threepio seemed pleased to hear it, and shuffled away to continue unpacking the bags that were left to attend to.

“I’m so relieved that you saw reason, Padmé,” Dormé said at last, able to get a word in edgewise now that Threepio was otherwise occupied.

Padmé frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I was really afraid that you would go to Vader,” Dormé replied. “And that he’d take you and the twins and I’d never see any of you again.”

Padmé made no reply, realizing that her friend had no idea what was truly going on. Obviously the guards who had escorted her to Delaya had neglected to mention that rather significant piece of information.

“Dormé, you don’t understand...” Padmé began. She was interrupted by a guard entering the room, and her anxiety rose at once. ‘What is it?’ she asked. “Is something amiss?”

“No, milady,” the guard replied. “There is a delivery here for you.”

Padmé stood up, frowning. “A delivery? From who? From where?”

“From Alderaan,” the guard told her. “It came with this,” he said, handing her a data pad.

Padmé took the pad and proceeded to read it. *With the compliments of Lord Darth Vader.*

She looked up at the guard, relieved. “Bring it in,” she said.

“Well, that will take some doing, milady,” he said. “It’s quite a large amount of goods.”

“Let me see,” she said, and followed the guard outside.

Outside the cottage Padmé was astounded to see four huge storage compartments sitting on the grass.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed. “What is all this?”

“Only one way to find out, milady,” the guard suggested with a smile.

“Dormé, give us a hand out here please!” Padmé called into the house.

“I’m coming!” Dormé replied. She saw the data pad that Padmé had set down on her way out the door. Curious to see who had sent the delivery, she activated it to read the name. *Darth Vader!*? Dormé dropped the data pad in her shock, and could only stand there for moment, too stunned to move.

“Dormé, what is it?”

Dormé looked up to see Padmé standing before her, holding a large box.

“Oh Padmé, what have you done?” Dormé said at last.

“What are you talking about?” Padmé said, setting down the box. It was then that she noticed the data pad on the floor. She looked back up at Dormé, realizing the reason she was

so upset.

"You *did* go to Vader, didn't you?" Dormé asked in horror. "He knows you're here!! Padmé, are you mad?"

Padmé frowned, angry at Dormé's patronizing attitude. "You don't know anything about this situation, Dormé," she said, turning to leave the room again. "Don't you dare try to patronize me!"

Dormé ran over and took Padmé by the arm. Padmé turned around in surprise, yanking her arm away from her friend. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Padmé, surely you realize that he is not to be trusted," she said. "You know what a fiend Darth Vader is!"

"Darth Vader loves me," Padmé retorted hotly. "He loves his children! He has gone to great lengths to arrange for our protection, and now he has sent all these supplies for us! Does that sound like something a fiend would do??"

Dormé remained silent, stung by her mistress' harsh tone. "No, but it does sound like something a master manipulator would do," she replied at last. "Can't you see what he's trying to do? He wants you to trust him; he wants to lull you into a false sense of security..."

"To what end?" Padmé cried. "If he meant to do me harm, he would have done so when he had me on board his ship! Why can't you understand that he loves me, Dormé? He is still Anakin, despite what he looks like, despite all the terrible things he has done the past five years. The man I love is still there, full of pain, full of guilt and remorse. You and Obi-Wan are cut from the same cloth, aren't you? Neither of you can see that there is still good in him. Well I know there is, I have seen it, you haven't. I have seen the way he treats his children, the love he shows them, the love he shows me; you haven't! How can you be so quick to judge a situation you know nothing about?"

"Because I remember what he did to you, Padmé," Dormé replied. "I was with you, remember? I was there when your life fell apart because of him! So don't tell me I don't know anything about this!"

Padmé stood, trembling with rage. She made no reply, and proceeded to open the box sitting on the floor before her. *You don't understand, Dormé; you haven't seen his eyes, you haven't seen the love and the pain that I have seen... you haven't seen the way his children look at him...*

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Padmé said at last, continuing to open the box. "But this is my life, Dormé; perhaps it would have been better if you'd stayed..." she stopped when she saw what was inside the box. She looked up at Dormé. "Does this look like something a cold, calculating monster would take the time to send?" she said, indicating the box.

Reluctantly, Dormé walked over to the large box and looked inside. Inside was the last thing in the galaxy she expected to see; toys. Many toys, of all sorts, of all sizes, toys for girls, toys for boys, stacks and stacks of them. *Darth Vader bought these?* She thought in astonishment. She looked up at Padmé, who was watching Dormé's reaction with great satisfaction.

“Luke left Spotty back on Hannas II, and was heart broken,” Padmé told Dormé. ‘Anakin went to great lengths to find a bear identical to Spotty for Luke,’ she continued. “He loves the children, Dormé,” she added, her voice softening. “I wish you could understand that, because it’s true. He loves us all, and we love him.”

Dormé picked up one of the many toys in the box, a doll with long blond braids and a frilly pink dress. *Leia will love this*, she thought despite herself. She looked at Padmé. “I can’t believe this,” she said softly. “Vader bought this?”

Padmé nodded. “You should see all the provisions he bought,” she said, seeing that Dormé was perhaps starting to see the truth. “Clothes for us all, food, bedding, dishes....it goes on and on. It will take hours to get it all unpacked.”

Dormé replaced the doll in the box. “Well, maybe we ought to give them a hand then,” she suggested with a smile.

Padmé smiled at her. “Good idea,” she said, and the two women left the house to help bring the boxes inside.

Chapter 13

CHAPTER 13

It had been very late by the time Padmé had gone to bed; she and Dormé spent many hours unpacking the enormous delivery. Early in the morning, Padmé's sleep was interrupted when the twins burst into her room and climbed into her bed.

"Good morning, Mommy!" they chorused as they snuggled next to her. "Is Daddy coming home today?"

"No, not today I'm afraid," Padmé replied.

"Where is he?" asked Luke.

"He's on his way to the Garos System, in the Mid Rim," Padmé replied, hoping the twins wouldn't ask what he was doing there. *How do I tell you that the father you adore is on a mission to hunt down and kill a man?*

"Just wait until you see what he sent for us, though," Padmé continued, diverting their train of thought.

"What did he send?" Leia asked, wide-eyed.

Padmé kissed each of the twins in turn. "Come and see."

The excitement of the twins was tremendous as they burrowed their way through the mountain of toys that their father had lavished upon them. The clothes and other items held little interest for them, however. Padmé and Dormé had tremendous difficulty dragging the excited children away from their booty to give them breakfast.

"I found computer hardware, Padmé," Dormé told her as each of them set to continue the unpacking. "There's everything's here!"

Padmé smiled. "Anakin has always been very generous," she said.

Dormé was surprised to hear Padmé use that name.

"Is he Anakin, Padmé? Really?" she asked. "I know he's loyal to you and the children; but is he truly Anakin Skywalker again?"

Padmé did not reply right away, focusing on the task she was occupied with. "He's Anakin to me," she said at last, not looking at Dormé.

"That's not what I'm asking, Padmé," Dormé said. "Where is he right now? Why isn't he here with you and the twins?"

"He's on a mission," Padmé replied noncommittally.

"What kind of mission?" Dormé persisted.

“What difference does it make?” Padmé asked in irritation, not wanting to think about it. “What do you think Palpatine would do to him if he just started disregarding his orders? He must maintain the outward appearance of Darth Vader to prevent Palpatine from finding the twins and me. Don’t you see?”

Dormé regarded her mistress for a moment. “Who are you trying to convince, Padmé? Me or yourself?”

Padmé said nothing, and continued to fold the towels neatly and pile them on a small table. “I’m going to take a shower,” she said at last, not looking at Dormé. “Please keep an eye on the children.”

Dormé nodded, and watched as Padmé retreated upstairs.

Once in the fresher, Padmé stared into the mirror, Dormé’s harsh, provocative question making her question everything she’d staked her and the twins’ lives on. *Was he truly capable of changing completely? Was he even willing to do so? Anakin, please don’t kill him... please show mercy... only that will enable the healing to start...*

Garos System

The *Exactor* reached Garos IV and established a high orbit to avoid the planetary sensors. Garos IV was a heavily forested planet, which made the job of finding Halcyon even more challenging. Vader had given great consideration to the mission, for it would be the vehicle by which he would stage his own death. He had already planned it out in his mind; the irony of the methods he would use not lost on him.

Master Halcyon proves to be fair and easy to get along with. He and I spend the day assembling and organizing troops and requisitioning supplies. It is a huge job, an enormous responsibility; but Halcyon is an easy man to work with, and treats me like an equal, rather than a subordinate. I appreciate this, for at 21, I am getting tired of being treated like a child.

“You’ve put in a long day, Anakin,” Halcyon tells me as we leave the supply depot. “Tomorrow we will do a final run through of everything, and then we should be ready to go.”

I nod my understanding. “Of course, Master,” I reply.

“Anakin, call me Nejaa,” he tells me, putting a hand on my shoulder amicably. “You’re a grown man now, after all, not a boy.”

“Thank you, Mas... I mean Nejaa,” I reply with a smile. “I appreciate that.”

“No problem,” he replies. “Now get to bed. Make sure you get a good night’s sleep.”

“I will,” I reply. “See you in the morning.”

Vader pushed the memories from his mind, memories of another lifetime, of a past long gone, and focused on his mission.

Twilight was falling upon the planet surface as Vader landed his shuttle. He had gone alone, knowing that the success of his mission depended on it being so. The falling light did not concern Vader; he would not require light to find his quarry, only the Force. It had been

the Force that had drawn his shuttle to this spot where Vader suspected a hidden outpost was nestled amid the great trees of the Garos IV forest; and it would lead him to the renegade Jedi.

Twigs snapped under his boots as he made his way through the foliage, his senses alert to the slightest movement, the slightest ripple in the Force. *Where are you, Halcyon?* He thought to himself. Nejaa Halcyon had been a Jedi Master, and was no doubt able to block his Force presence. The fact that he was still alive five years after the Purges proved that his ability to do so was formidable indeed. *Just as Yoda's... just as that traitor Kenobi's...* The thought of his former master, his former friend sent a dark surge of fury through Vader. It crackled around him like static electricity.

“Stop right there, Vader.”

Vader did not even turn to acknowledge the source of the voice, but merely used the Force to push him away, sending his body to shatter against a nearby tree. More rebels emerged from the forest, and the forest's quiet serenity was shattered with the sound of blaster fire. Vader deflected the blasts, the Dark Side aiding him, his blood-red blade flashing furiously, dispatching the hapless men to their deaths with incredible speed. Vader stepped over the dead bodies and continued, relentless, with single-minded determination towards the small building he knew was hidden in the forest.

Nejaa Halcyon stepped out of the bunker to face his pursuer. He had been too late to stop the slaughter of the rebels who had vowed to protect the Jedi Master; their dead bodies were strewn obscenely everywhere. But the killing would end now; he would make sure of it.

“Nejaa Halcyon,” Vader said simply as the Jedi Master and he stood facing one another, each with their lightsaber ignited.

Halcyon nodded. “Darth Vader,” he returned. “Your killing ways will end here, Vader. I mean to see to that personally.”

Vader snorted. “I am not intimidated by your weak powers, Jedi,” he rumbled menacingly. “The Jedi were weak, including you, Halcyon.”

“You are the weak one, Vader,” Halcyon returned, shaking his head. “You are the one who allowed yourself to be enslaved by the Sith. Tell me, Anakin, is slavery any easier the second time around?”

Halcyon's words angered Vader, and he lifted his saber high above his head, his fury surging through him.

Anakin, no!! Vader was shocked to hear the voice of Qui-Gon Jinn, and it stayed his blade. But only for a moment. He brought it down viciously, clashing against the green blade of Halcyon.

“You can't deny it, can you, Skywalker?” Halcyon taunted as the blades sparked and crackled against one another. “You know you're a slave, you know you've sold your soul to that fiend who you call master. Think of the price of that servitude, Anakin! You were once a great Jedi, the greatest of all! You threw it all away, and for what? To live your life as half a man in fealty to an insane demon that treats you no better than the Hutts who owned you as a boy?”

"I am no slave!" Vader retorted at last, not even sure if his words were directed at Halcyon or at Sidious himself.

"Prove it then," Halcyon challenged him as he pushed Vader's blade away. "Abandon the Dark Side, and become the man you were born to be once again."

Vader stood facing the man he had once fought alongside with, the man who had helped him earn his knighthood, and who had treated him with more respect than any of the other Jedi masters ever had. *Listen to him, Anakin*, Qui-Gon's voice urged him. *You are the Chosen One! You are better than this! Think of your family... think of your children, Ani.*

To Halcyon's astonishment, Vader stepped back and turned off his lightsaber. "Run," he told him. "The emperor knows you are here, you must get off this planet or he will surely find you."

Halcyon blinked in astonishment. "What... what did you say?"

"You heard me," Vader grumbled. "Get out of here, Nejaa. Get off this planet while you still have a chance."

"And what about you, Anakin?" Nejaa asked, lowering his saber. "What will you do?"

Vader sighed. "Much of my destiny is still hidden from me," he replied. "But I know that I must destroy the emperor. I will not allow him to destroy my family."

"Your family? I had no idea you had one," Nejaa replied.

Vader nodded. "Senator Amidala is my wife, and we have twins, a boy and a girl. Sidious told me I had killed her five years ago, before the twins were born, and I have only found out recently that he lied to me. He lied about everything, Nejaa... everything! And for that he will die."

Nejaa frowned. "Your devotion to your family is commendable, Anakin, but don't let the hatred you bear the emperor destroy the good man that is still inside of you."

Vader made no reply. "Leave, Nejaa," he said. "Before it's too late." With that he turned and left the Jedi Master, who could only watch in astonishment at his retreating figure.

Chapter 14

Dear Obi-Wan:

By the time you read this, I will be on my way to the Alderaan System. I was wrong about Padmé; she did not go to Vader, thank the gods above. She is living on the planet Delaya, under the protection of Bail Organa, Viceroy of Alderaan. I was so relieved when his men came to collect the droids and I; I am certain that she would have been in great danger had she sought out that monster Vader. So you can rest assured, Obi-Wan: Padmé and twins are safe on Delaya. Vader will not find them. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you in person, but the men were quite anxious to get us all to Delaya as soon as possible. Please come and visit us there if you get the chance—I know Padmé and the twins must miss you, as do I.

Dormé

Obi-Wan reread the message a second time, and then a third. *Was this truly from Dormé? Or was it from Padmé, trying to throw me off her scent? Surely Padmé wouldn't invite me to visit... if she's even on Delaya at all...* Obi-Wan cursed himself for not being around when Dormé had left; if there had been any duplicity on the part of either her or the men who came to collect her, he would have sniffed it out. But reading a message—it was impossible to do so. *Padmé wouldn't want to see me now anyway*, he reminded himself, remembering how angry she was when they had parted. *No, not angry, incensed...* The love she still bore Anakin staggered Kenobi, for he could not understand for the life of him how she could love him after what he had done to her at Mustafar. The image of Vader Force choking his own pregnant wife was one Kenobi knew he would never forget; one he'd had many a nightmare about over the past five years. *What would have happened had I not been there to stop him? Would he have killed her?? And how can she still love him after he did that to her?* The very fact that she had not gone to Vader gave him hope, however; perhaps upon reflection she realized how foolhardy an idea it was. Even if she still loved him, surely she must realize that the man who once was Anakin Skywalker no longer existed, and the monster that had once borne his name was incapable of loving her. Obi-Wan had always thought Padmé was an intelligent woman; no doubt that superior sense of reason of hers finally kicked in and forced her to see this before she did something rash. *Thank the Force for that*, Kenobi reflected with relief. *You may hate me right now, Padmé, but at least you're safe from that villain. At least he has no idea that you and the twins are alive.* Eventually he would insinuate himself back into her and the twins' lives; he had vowed to protect them, after all. Besides that, the twins would need his guidance once they were ready to learn how to use their Force abilities; *all in good time*, he told himself. *Like it or not, Padmé, our destinies lie along the same path.*

Planet Delaya in the Alderaan System

"My lady, there is one large crate left, but we aren't certain it's something we can unpack."

Padmé looked up from the box that she had been unpacking to the guards. "Why not?" she asked simply.

“Well, it seems to just be filled with....building materials,” one of them said, at a loss. “It looks like some very sophisticated material, too.”

Padmé frowned. *What could it be?* She wondered. “Let me see,” she said finally, standing up. “Threepio, Artoo, come with me.”

The two droids followed their mistress as she made her way outside to where the final crate sat. It had been opened, but, as the guard had alluded to, it was basically untouched. Padmé walked up to it and peered inside. *What is all this??* she wondered. She turned to Threepio

“Have a look and see what you think,” she instructed.

The protocol droid trundled over to the crate, his curiosity giving him extra, highly unusual speed. He peered into the box, trying to make out the connection between all the unusual machinery within.

“It looks to me as though someone is planning on building something, my lady Padmé,” the droid pronounced at last.

Padmé sighed with exasperation. “Yes, we were able to figure out that much,” she replied. “Any idea what?”

“I’m afraid I’d have to have a look at all of the materials to even hazard a guess,” Threepio replied. “Shall I commence doing so?”

Padmé shook her head. “No, not out here,” she replied, looking up at the sky which was growing darker by the minute. “It looks like rain. Bring it inside, put it in the spare room upstairs, and start unpacking it here. I want to know what all this is.”

“Very good, milady,” replied Threepio.

Garos IV— The Garos System

Darth Vader lifted the shuttle from the planet surface, trying to put the image of the human carnage he’d left behind out of his mind. *How many men did I kill back there? Twenty? Thirty??*

But you spared the life of a friend... remember that Anakin.

Vader shook his head, certain that he was imagining the voice in his head, the voice of his first master, Qui-Gon Jinn.

That is the first step towards the light, Ani, and you know it is.

Vader didn’t have time to consider the master’s words, for no sooner had he escaped the planet’s atmosphere than he was met by at least a dozen Rebel snub fighters. *Organa set me up...* he thought angrily, and then realized this wasn’t the case. Organa had known that Rebels were here; he had warned Vader of their presence, in an offhanded way, without openly betraying the Rebels who he also considered allies. He thought no more of it as he immediately raised the shields of the shuttle and prepared for battle. *Perhaps I will not need to fake my death after all,* he thought somberly as he dove into the midst of the rebel ships. *Perhaps it is my destiny to die here.*

It had been a while since Vader had been involved in a dogfight such as this, but his skills had not diminished nonetheless. Using the Force and his natural abilities as a pilot, he dispatched ship after ship, evading others and making maneuvers that he knew no rebel would dare attempt. It soon became evident, however, that despite his superior skill, he was too greatly outnumbered to win with conventional means. *Time to do something crazy*, he thought grimly. Directing his ship at the heart of the rebel fleet, he accelerated, knowing that they would not have time to react due to the breakneck speed that he was traveling. Closer and closer he raced until finally — impact. Using the Force, he made a micro-jump into hyperspace, timing it perfectly to look as though he had perished in a fireball when his ship had made contact with three rebel ships.

Planet Delaya

Padmé stood in the room with the droids and looked around at all that had been unpacked. *What is all this?* she wondered. And then she realized what it was... *the hyperbaric chamber...*

"I know what this is," she announced at last.

Threepio looked up at her. "What is it, milady?"

"A hyperbaric chamber," she replied. "Do you know what that is?"

"Oh yes, milady," Threepio replied proudly. "You seem to forget that I..."

"Do you know how to build it?" Padmé interjected.

"I do believe so, milady," the droid replied.

"You *believe* so?" she asked. "If you don't know, then don't even try. I don't want you messing it up, Threepio. It's a very important piece of equipment."

"I won't...mess it up, milady," the droid replied in a hurt tone. "I assure you."

Artoo made comment at this point that Padmé interpreted as one of derision and had to hide a smile.

"Okay then," she replied. "Artoo, keep an eye on him," she said as she left the room.

Dormé and the children were just sitting down as Padmé joined them for the evening meal.

"Did you figure out what all that is?" Dormé asked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, it's for Anakin," she replied, not saying any more on the topic. She and Dormé had said very little to one another where he was concerned, for Dormé still harbored serious doubts about the trustworthiness of Darth Vader.

Barely had they begun their meal when one of the security guards came into the room.

"Senator Amidala, a ship has landed on the platform in the clearing," he told her.

Immediately Padmé's heart jumped to her throat as she and Dormé looked at one another.

"I've sent a detachment down," the guard continued. "I suggest you and your children go upstairs and..."

"It's Daddy," Luke said to his mother. "Daddy is here."

Padmé looked at her son, astonished with the calm sureness the boy manifested.

"Are you sure, Luke?" she asked.

"Luke is right," Leia said. "It's Daddy!" she added, getting out of her chair.

"Leia wait!" Padmé shouted, jumping up and following Leia. Luke joined his mother, leaving Dormé alone and bewildered.

"Now children, wait here," Padmé commanded the twins as they reached the path that led to the forest. "If it isn't your father..."

"But it is," Luke insisted. "I know it is, Mommy."

"And so do I," Leia insisted.

Padmé was torn; it was obvious that the twins shared a psychic bond with their father through the Force, and were more than likely right. *But what if they weren't?*

"See? It is him!" Leia exclaimed, pointing behind Padmé. She turned to see Vader emerge from the forest, followed by a small group of guards. She smiled, and allowed the children to run to him.

Vader stopped when he saw his children running towards him and got down on one knee to greet them. He opened his arms and held them close as they reached him, his heart swelling with love for the twins.

"We missed you so much!" Leia said to her father. "What took you so long!?"

Vader wanted to laugh at his daughter's imperious attitude. "Forgive me, my lady," he replied, tugging one of her braids gently.

"Thank you for all the toys, Daddy," Luke said, looking up at his father with adoration.

Vader took the small boy's face in one large hand. "You're welcome, son," he said. "I'm glad you liked them."

"Come on," Leia said, taking his hand. "Mommy probably wants to see you too," she said.

Vader grinned. "Yes, probably."

Vader walked the rest of the way with a twin on each side, their small hands hidden in his enormous ones. When he reached the edge of the forest, he saw Padmé standing there waiting for him. She smiled when she saw him, the relief filling her. He walked to her, and, releasing the children's hands, embraced his wife.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "We've been so worried."

"I'm fine," he said, stroking her hair softly. "Better than fine, actually."

Padmé looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Come inside and I'll tell you all about it," he said.

From the window, Dormé witnessed the tender familial scene with shock. *How can this be?* She thought in astonishment. But the manner in which Vader greeted his wife and children, the love tenderness that were evident even without seeing his face, was enough to convince Dormé that she was wrong; Vader *had* changed. *No, he was not Vader anymore; he was truly Anakin Skywalker once again...*

“Dormé,” Vader said as he and Padmé entered the room. Vader held the twins in his arms.

“Hello,” she said, not even sure what to call him. “This is quite unexpected,” she said at last.

“I told you he had changed,” Padmé said, linking her arm through his. “Can you see that now?”

Dormé nodded begrudgingly. “Yes, I can’t very well deny it now,” she said.

No, you can’t, Padmé thought triumphantly as the children escorted their father into the house. *No one can deny it now, not even Obi-Wan Kenobi.*

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Luke and Leia Skywalker were as excited as two five year olds can be. Despite the fact that their father had in fact been the one to buy the toys, they insisted on showing him every one of them nonetheless. As for Vader, he simply sat and enjoyed their enthusiasm, even using the Force to make some of the ships Luke had been drawn to fly around the room, to the delight of his children. Padmé watched, knowing even without seeing it in his face how tired Vader was. *How is he going to sleep?* She wondered anxiously. The chamber he required to sleep was far from complete; she had no delusions that Threepio would be able to put it together despite his assurances to the contrary. *When was the last time you did sleep, Ani?* She wondered. The last time she had known him to sleep truly well was during their second honeymoon, the glorious ten days that they had spent together on Naboo after he had been knighted. The thought of those days brought warmth to her face as she recalled the unbridled passion that had consumed them while they had been there. It seemed like they couldn't get enough of one another, their passion for one another unquenchable. *I conceived Luke and Leia during that ten days...* she reflected.

"I think it's time for bed, children," Padmé said at last, forcing herself to push the heated memories from the past out of her mind. *It's just too frustrating to think of that now...*

"Mommy, can't we please stay up a little longer?" Leia pleaded, her big brown eyes looking up at her mother imploringly.

"You've already stayed up a little longer than usual," Padmé said, not letting her daughter get her way. "Come on, let's go. Daddy will be here in the morning, you can play with him then."

"I'll help," Vader offered, figuring it would appease his outraged daughter.

"Good idea," Padmé said as they stood up. "Come along you two."

Dormé watched as Padmé and Vader brought their children upstairs, both of the twins in their father's arms. *Who ever would have imagined this could happen?* She thought in wonder. *Darth Vader the family man?* It hardly seemed possible, even imaginable; and yet she herself had seen it with her own eyes. There was no doubt how he felt about Padmé and the children; his adoration of them was clear. What was most startling of all, however, was the children's acceptance of him. But it was more than acceptance: it was love, pure and innocent. They had no idea who their father was, or the dark deeds he committed over the past five years; to him he was simply Daddy, a loving man who doted on them and who loved their mother. *The way a father should be.*

Dormé shook her head, wondering how Obi-Wan would react if he knew of the change in Vader. Suddenly she remembered the note she had left him, and a cold wave of fear spread over her. *What if he comes here and finds Vader?? What will happen if the two of them meet face to face now?* She hated to consider it, for she felt certain that she knew the answer; one

of them would die. *I have to tell Padmé*, she thought anxiously, hating the thought of it. All she could hope for was that Kenobi was content to leave well enough alone. If he truly believed that Padmé was under the protection of Bail Organa, then he would not leave Hannas II to seek her out. He was, after all, a fugitive of the Empire, and traveling to the Alderaan System would be chancy. *Don't do it, Obi-Wan*, Dormé thought desperately. *Vader will surely kill you this time if you try to take his family from him.*

"Now then, time for sleeping," Padmé announced as the twins snuggled under the covers. 'It's been an exciting couple of days,' she said, sitting on the end of Luke's bed. "And the two of you have been going non-stop. Time for a nice big sleep, okay?"

"But we're not tired," Leia tried to protest as she rubbed her eyes. "And I want to see Daddy."

Padmé looked at Vader with a smile. "Daddy's not going anywhere, Leia," she said. "You'll see him in the morning."

"Okay," Leia replied with a yawn. Padmé looked up at Luke, who was already asleep.

"Sweet dreams," Padmé said, standing up and moving to the top of Luke's bed. She kissed him on his brow, and then moved to Leia's bed and did the same to her.

"Good night Leia," Vader, said wishing fervently that he could kiss his children goodnight as well. Leia held her arms open to him, and he moved to her bending down so the child could wrap her arms around his neck. "I'm glad you're home," she told him, and then kissed him on the mask.

Vader couldn't speak, for the emotions he felt overwhelmed him temporarily. "I'm glad to be home," he said at last. "Sleep well little one."

"Mistress Padmé, I have started assembling the..." Threepio stopped when he saw Darth Vader emerge from the twins' room behind Padmé.

"Oh my!" the droid exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air in alarm. "We've been taken over by the Empire! Oh woe is me! Captured by Darth Vader!"

"Threepio, that's enough," Padmé admonished him. "Keep your voice down, the children are asleep!"

"But... but Mistress Padmé," the droid babbled on, puzzled by the calmness with which his mistress walked along side the notorious Vader. "What has happened?"

"Come in here and be quiet, and I'll tell you," she retuned. She led Vader to the room where the guards had brought the crate containing the parts for the chamber. 'Here it is,' she said to Vader as they entered the room. "I'm afraid no one here quite knew what to do with all of this," she added apologetically.

"No doubt," he replied. "Perhaps I should have sent schematics as well, though I doubt Threepio would have been up to the challenge."

Padmé smiled at his comment, knowing how easily the droid was offended. As for Threepio, he simply stared at the couple, more confused than ever.

“What’s the matter, Threepio,” Vader continued, enjoying the droid’s confusion. “Don’t recognize your maker anymore?”

“My maker?!” the droid replied. “My maker was Anakin Skywalker, sir. And...”

Artoo, who had by now caught on, let out a long series of whistles and beeps that anyone would recognize as being patronizing. Threepio looked at his companion, hands akimbo.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped, “How could he be Master Ani??”

“He *is* Anakin,” Padmé put in. “Why else do you think he’s here?”

“I...I have no idea why,” Threepio replied, hating to admit that he was at a loss.

Vader was amused by the entire incident. “You haven’t changed a bit, Threepio,” he said at last, turning to see what progress the droid had managed to make with the chamber. *What a mess*, he thought. “Did you do this?” he asked Threepio.

“Oh, yes sir,” the droid beamed, pleased that his work had been noticed at last. “I’m only too happy to...”

“It’s all wrong,” Vader told him. “Take it apart at once.”

“I told you to leave it alone,” Padmé said, shaking her head, trying not to laugh at the droid’s unusual loss for words.

Artoo put his own opinion in at this point, making matters worse.

“Come on,” Padmé said, taking Vader’s hand.

“I’m afraid you won’t be sleeping in there tonight,” she said.

“No, it doesn’t appear that way,” Vader concurred.

“You need to rest, Ani,” she said, stopping and turning to him. “I can tell you’re tired.”

Vader nodded. “Yes, I won’t deny it,” he said. “What do you suggest?”

Padmé sighed, thinking for a moment. “I don’t know,” she admitted.

Vader thought for a moment. “Where is your room?” he asked.

Padmé was surprised by his question. “This way,” she said, leading him to the other end of the corridor.

“There,” he said, pointing to the upholstered chair in the corner of her room. “That’s where I’ll spend the night.”

Padmé frowned. “You can sleep in a chair?”

“I didn’t say I’d sleep, Padmé,” he replied. “But I’ll rest, nonetheless. Being close to you will help me to relax. I hope you don’t mind,” he added, thinking perhaps he was overstepping.

“Mind?” she said. “Why would I? You’re my husband, of course I don’t mind. I just wish there was some way you could sleep too.”

"I will," he replied, sitting down. "I will build the chamber tomorrow; that is if that idiot Threepio hasn't damaged all the parts."

Padmé laughed. "Let's hope he hasn't done that much damage. I'll be right back."

Vader nodded as his wife disappeared into the adjoining 'fresher. He was tired, more tired than he had let on to Padmé. The thought of spending the night sitting in a chair was most unappealing to him; but what choice did he have? *At least I'll be close to her*, he reflected, realizing that this alone would make the night bearable. He had always found comfort in her presence, her serene, gentle aura acting like a balm upon his tempestuous soul. She still had that effect on him, he realized. With her he was closer to being human than he'd been in five years; she and the children were drawing his humanity out from deep within him where he had imprisoned it five years earlier. *Is it possible to be truly human again? To be the man she loves and deserves in her life?*

Vader looked toward the fresher, suddenly recalling he and Padmé's wedding night. With a smile he remembered how he'd stood there, inexperienced, nervous, a mere nineteen years old, and wondered if he ought to undress while his new bride was in the fresher. *How innocent we were then*, he thought wistfully. *Nothing mattered then but our love...*

Every rational thought stored in my brain evaporates as Padmé emerges from the 'fresher. She is wearing a pale pink negligee, its sheer, silken fabric clinging to every sensual curve of her body. My eyes travel slowly from her head down to her toes and then back again. Finally our eyes meet.

"Padmé," I manage to say. "You... you look so... so beautiful."

She smiles as she walks over to me. "Thank you," she replies softly. "I'm happy you think so."

"You take my breath away," I tell her as I run my hands over her bare arms. I pull her close and kiss her, a slow, passionate kiss. My hands slide the thin straps off of her shoulders as my mouth travels down to her neck and onto her bare shoulders.

"Ani," she sighs as my mouth grazes her neck softly, the scent of her skin driving me mad with desire....

Vader's recollections were interrupted when the fresher door opened and Padmé returned to the room. For once he was glad of the mask, glad she couldn't see the way his eyes roved over her as she stood there in her nightgown.

"Ani?" she said, puzzled by his silence, wondering if he'd fallen asleep.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Oh, I thought you'd drifted off," she said, picking up her brush and sitting in front of the mirror. "So tell me about your mission," she asked, bracing herself for his response.

Vader watched his wife as she brushed out her long tresses, his mind anywhere but on Garos IV. He forced himself to concentrate, however, and looked away.

"It was... interesting," he said at last.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

“The Jedi on Garos IV was Nejaa Halcyon,” he told her.

Padmé stopped her brushing and turned to him. “Nejaa?” she asked, remembering the name at once. “Oh Ani, please tell me you didn’t...”

“I didn’t kill him, Padmé,” he interjected. “I killed the rebels who were guarding the outpost, but I didn’t kill him.”

Padmé winced under his words, the way in which he told her how he’d killed, so effortlessly and methodically....but he’d spared Nejaa.

“Can I ask why you spared him?” she asked tentatively.

Vader considered her question, not even certain he knew how to answer it. “I’m not sure,” he replied at last. “I think a lot of it had to do with you and the children.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised by his words.

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he said. ‘I can’t explain it any better than that,’ he said, not sure he ought to mention hearing Qui-Gon’s voice in his head. “Nejaa was another reason. He knew who I was, Padmé; knew who I had been at one time, and he challenged me to be that person again.”

Padmé put her brush down and turned her body to face him. “You’re already there, Ani,” she said. “Don’t doubt that for a moment.”

Vader was silent, her words surprising him. “I don’t know who I am right now, Padmé,” he admitted to her.

She stood up and walked over to him. “I can tell you who you are,” she said. “You’re Anakin Skywalker. If you weren’t, why would you be here protecting your family? Why would you love your children, and they you? Why would I love you?”

Vader was shaken by her words, and made no reply. He wanted to believe what she was saying was true, but if it were, then who was the vision of terror who slaughtered the rebel soldiers on Garos IV? Was that Anakin Skywalker?

“I don’t know anymore,” he said at last. “I’m tired, I’m confused...”

She came over to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He looked up at her.

“I know you are,” she said gently. “You need to rest,” she added.

He nodded, and then, most unexpectedly, pulled her to him, right onto his lap. Padmé, though surprised, was not unhappy by the move, and laid her head on his armored shoulder, taking comfort in his strong embrace.

“Goodnight, Ani,” she said sleepily as he wrapped his great cloak around her.

“Goodnight my angel,” he replied.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

The entire house was quiet, and every sentient being was asleep; except for one. Vader was accustomed to not sleeping, for it had become something of a rarity for him to spend any time at night asleep. But this night his inability to sleep was for a different reason than usual. This night he could not tear his eyes away from his angel.

Spending the night with her in his arms was like a dream to him, and not something he'd ever imagined would happen in a thousand years. *Yet, here she is*, he reflected in awe as he studied the serene beauty of her sleeping face. In the past their nights spent in one another's arms were the culmination of an evening of passion; they would be exhausted, sated from their torrid union, and would simply drift off in one another's arms. Although the physical union was not yet possible, the connection was still there, not to mention the longing. Holding her in his arms close to him this way was like a fire in his soul, setting his senses aflame. He did not allow himself to entertain the possibility that one day they would be able to assume such a relationship; it was too much to hope for. Yet, surely there was a chance; surely it was not outside the realm of possibility that his injuries could be repaired. *Sidious had lied about everything else, so why not this?*, he reasoned.

Vader's musings were interrupted by disturbance in the Force. He frowned, focusing on the source of it. *It's Leia...*

Vader stood up, careful not to wake his wife, and carried her to her bed. Gently he laid her down and pulled a blanket up over her, wishing fervently that he could kiss her as she slept. He then turned and left the room.

As quietly as he could, he walked down the dark hallway, allowing the infrared sensors in his mask to show him the way. He stopped at the twins' room and listened at the door. Leia was crying. Without another moment's hesitation, he opened the door and proceeded to his daughter's bed. Looking down at her, he could see that she was in the throes of a nightmare. *No not her too*, he thought in anguish, hoping that his children would be spared the horror of the nightmares he'd suffered as a child.

Gently Vader knelt down at Leia's side, one hand on her small arm. "Leia, wake up," he said. "You're having a dream."

Leia did not wake up right away, and so Vader shook her gently. Suddenly Leia's eyes snapped open. She looked around wildly, still half asleep.

"Leia, it's alright, you were just having a nightmare," Vader said. But Leia was not to be consoled, and cried even harder, confused and disoriented in the dark. Vader picked her up in his arms and held her as close as he could, trying to comfort her as she woke up from her nightmare.

"What are you doing to her!?"

Vader turned to the doorway to see Dormé standing there, her eyes full of anger. "What are you doing to that child?" she asked again, misinterpreting the entire scene. "Leave her alone!"

Vader felt sickened at the implied accusation in Dormé's words. *She thinks I mean to harm my child... or perhaps steal her in the night from her mother...*

"I am consoling my daughter, who has had a nightmare," Vader replied as calmly as possible.

"You expect me to believe that?" Dormé said. "I thought this was too good to be true! You've just been waiting for a chance to steal these children haven't you? Where is Padmé? Did you lock her in her room or maybe something worse?"

"That's enough, Dormé!"

Dormé turned quickly to see Padmé standing there, her dark eyes full of anger.

"Padmé!" she cried. "Leia was crying! He... he was taking her out of her bed... she wouldn't stop crying!!"

"She had a nightmare," Vader replied evenly, sitting down on the chair, cradling Leia in his arms. She was awake now, and looking around in bewilderment at all the adults in her room. She looked up at her father. 'It's alright,' he said, stroking her hair gently. "It was just a bad dream," he said.

"Leia, honey," Padmé said, pushing past Dormé into the bedroom. She knelt in front of Vader, taking Leia's hands in her own. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Leia nodded, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "Yes, Mommy," she murmured. "It was scary."

Padmé looked up at Vader. "I didn't hear anything," she said. "How did you know?"

"I felt her fear," he said simply. "I knew she was having a bad dream before she made a sound, Padmé. But apparently your handmaiden doesn't believe me capable of comforting my own child," he added, looking up at Dormé.

Padmé turned and looked at Dormé as well, shaking her head. "You simply cannot accept that he has changed, can you?" she asked bitterly. "Even after you've seen how the children love him, how he loves them....what will it take for you to believe?"

"I... I'm sorry," Dormé stammered, embarrassed and humiliated. "I just assumed that... well, that..."

"That I would harm my own child?" Vader finished for her, his voice calm and yet edged with anger. "Isn't that what you were assuming?"

Dormé looked down, unable to face either of them any more. "Yes," she said quietly. "That's what I thought."

Padmé looked up at Vader, and even without seeing his face, knew that he was upset by the entire ugly incident. "Why don't you put Leia back to bed?" she suggested to him. "I need to have a chat with Dormé."

Vader merely nodded as he stood up with his daughter in his arms. Leia had already gone back to sleep, oblivious of the tempest her nightmare had created in the household.

“Come with me,” Padmé commanded her handmaiden as she exited the small room. Dormé followed, looking back over her shoulder briefly to see Vader tucking his daughter in with the tenderness and love of an adoring father.

“Dormé, this cannot continue,” Padmé said as soon as they’d stepped out into the hallway. “I will not stand for this!”

“I’m sorry, milady,” Dormé replied miserably, wiping a tear from her cheek. “Truly I am. But you have to understand how strange all this is for me. Darth Vader has been a notorious villain for the past five years! How can you expect me just to accept that he has changed over night?”

“Because I do,” Padmé retorted hotly. “I accept him! More than that, I love him. I know you cannot understand that, but it’s the truth. And if you cannot learn to live with it, learn to accept that he and I are going to raise our family together, then perhaps its time you left this household.”

Dormé was shocked that Padmé would even suggest such a thing. They had known one another since they were both girls, from the days when Padmé had been the queen of Naboo: surely she wasn’t serious!

“Padmé, I can’t believe you’d suggest such a thing!” Dormé cried. “After all we’ve been through together; after all I’ve done for you! You’d choose him over me?”

“In a heartbeat,” Padmé replied without a moment’s hesitation. “Don’t you get it, Dormé? Anakin is my soul mate, the love of my life! You expect me just to abandon him because of what Palpatine and Obi-Wan did to him?”

“Now wait just a minute,” Dormé cut in. “You’re actually blaming Obi-Wan for this?”

“It was Obi-Wan who left Anakin to die on Mustafar,” Padmé replied angrily. “Left him mutilated and burning to death. You didn’t know that about your perfect Jedi Knight, did you Dormé? I suppose he wouldn’t tell you something like that, it might tarnish his flawless image.”

“It wasn’t Obi-Wan who abandoned you, Padmé,” Dormé retorted. “It wasn’t him who left you alone and pregnant, who turned his back on you and the commitment he’d made to you. That was your Anakin who did that!”

“He thought I was dead!” Padmé cried. “Palpatine lied to him, just as Obi-Wan lied to me! We were both used; both lied to by those we trusted most! And now that we’ve found one another again, you expect me to walk away??”

“I expect you to do what is best for your children,” Dormé replied. “Whom you seem to have forgotten in the equation. Do you think having a Sith for a father is best for them, Padmé? Truly?”

Padmé narrowed her eyes, having to restrain herself from striking her one time friend. “How dare you imply that I would ever compromise the safety and well being of my children,” she said, her voice low but deadly calm. “Leave my sight, Dormé; leave it now before I do something I might regret.”

Dormé knew Padmé well enough to see that her anger had reached monumental proportions, and so she backed down. Without another word, she retreated to her bedroom and closed the door. Padmé stood in the corridor, shaking with rage.

Vader had overheard the entire conversation, and felt awkward to be at the center of it. He walked over to Padmé, who stood with her back to him. Wordlessly he wrapped his arms around her. She started when she felt him, but only for a moment, and was only too happy to melt into his embrace.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply.

Padmé shook her head as the tears came to her eyes. “Don’t be,” she said. “Dormé was completely out of line.”

“That’s not what I’m apologizing for, Padmé,” he said. ‘I’m sorry for everything. For not trusting you, for not confiding in you, for Mustafar....’ he stopped, the memories of that horrific day still too close to think of without the agony that they had both endured because of what he had done there. “I don’t know how you can accept me after what I did, Padmé.”

Padmé turned around so she could face him. “Mustafar was the worst day of my life, Anakin,” she said. “I won’t lie to you; I still have nightmares about it. But if we are ever to get past it, there must be forgiveness. I have forgiven you for that day, Anakin. Now you need to forgive yourself.”

Vader was silent, not knowing how to respond to her words. *Forgive myself? I’ve spent the past five years believing I killed my soul mate; forgiveness does not come easily.*

“Come,” he said, taking her hand. “You should get back to sleep.”

“What about you?” she replied. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

“A little,” he lied. “I’m going to start that chamber before Threepio gets it into his head to have another crack at it.”

Padmé smiled. “Alright, good luck.”

“Thanks,” he said as he left her at the doorway of her room. He turned back to her. “Sleep well, angel.”

She smiled. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He nodded. “You will. Goodnight.”

Chapter 17

CHAPTER 17

"But sire, his fighter went up in a ball of fire! There was no body to recover!"

Emperor Palpatine drummed his fingers on the arm rests of his throne, studying the image of the young captain before him. His mind was easy to read, and it showed no sign of duplicity. Phipps truly believed that Darth Vader was dead. *But was he?* Palpatine himself had felt a tremor in the Force recently, a shifting in the balance between Dark and Light. Such a shift would be consistent with the death of a Sith; for despite their best efforts, Palpatine knew that there were still Jedi out there somewhere in the galaxy.

"What of the renegade Halcyon?" Palpatine asked Phipps. "Was he found?"

"Our scouts found a small outpost hidden deep within the forests of Garos IV," Phipps explained, perspiring profusely under the emperor's rueful glare. "Lord Vader had dispatched at least thirty rebels, your majesty; but there was no sign of any Jedi present. It is our belief that the outpost was merely that of a fringe group of the Rebel Alliance, and that they started the rumor of Halcyon's presence to attract our attention. It certainly seems as though Lord Vader's presence was anticipated, judging by the number of rebel ships who ambushed him."

"And why didn't the *Exactor* take any action to engage in this skirmish?" Palpatine demanded. "Instead of letting Lord Vader fight them all himself?"

Phipps swallowed hard. "Sire, Lord Vader himself ordered us to maintain a high orbit to keep the rebels from detecting us. We moved in as soon as we realized he was in trouble, but by then it was too late."

"I hope at least you took care of the rest of the rebel scum," Palpatine replied coldly.

Phipps nodded emphatically. "Yes, your majesty," he averred. "Not one ship escaped us."

Palpatine nodded his understanding, sitting back in his throne. *So Vader is dead, he thought numbly. My promising young apprentice dead before his thirtieth birthday.*

"That will be all, Phipps," the emperor said, ending the transmission abruptly.

Phipps slumped in relief to be out of the emperor's presence, and left the room.

"Your orders, sir?" a young officer asked him as he started down the corridor.

"Scan the area one more time," Phipps commanded. "And then prepare to leave the system."

"Yes sir."

Planet Delaya

Dawn was breaking as Darth Vader stood back to examine his handiwork. He had managed to assemble the main components of the chamber with the assistance of Artoo-

Detoo and See Threepio. He hadn't been working long when he realized that the room was not big enough to assemble the chamber.

Vader stood pondering the problem, frustrated by this impasse. His life would be extremely challenging without the chamber; he had already abandoned so much of the technology he'd grown dependent upon in his decision to join his family. The chamber was the only place he could feel remotely human, *the only place where I can feel the touch of my wife... I must find a way.*

"Artoo has a suggestion, sir," Threepio said, interrupting Vader's thoughts. 'I personally think it's an idiotic one,' he added scornfully. "But he insists that I tell you nevertheless."

Vader turned to the little astromech droid. "What is it, Artoo?"

The astromech whistled and beeped at him. Vader was unable to interpret him, and looked up at Threepio for a translation.

"He suggests that you knock down the wall," Threepio said. "Which really is the most ridiculous suggestion I've ever..."

"It's brilliant," Vader interjected. "What is on the other side of this wall?"

"Why that is Miss Dormé's room," Threepio replied. "I highly doubt she would think too highly of this course of action."

"I don't give a damn what Miss Dormé thinks," Vader grumbled.

Threepio was taken aback by Vader's acerbic comment, but knew better than to comment. He was not the same Master Ani that he had once known, and it wasn't just the mask that made him so. He was a different man, a dark and brooding man; and even though Threepio claimed to be an expert on human behavior, even he had to admit that the change in his maker had confused him. Yet, he made Mistress Padmé and the twins happy; so that was enough for Threepio.

"Good morning, Mommy," Luke announced as he climbed onto his mother's bed.

"Good morning, Luke," she replied, pulling him into her embrace. "Did you have a good sleep?" she asked, kissing his tousled hair.

"Uh huh," Luke yawned. Padmé was always amazed at her son's ability to sleep through anything. The entire incident with Leia's nightmare the previous night had gone completely unnoticed by him. *So much the better*, Padmé reflected.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Yes," Luke replied. "Where is Daddy?" he asked next.

"I'm not sure," she said, looking at the chair where they had spent part of the night together. "Let's go find him."

Luke and Padmé got off the bed and left the room. She headed to the other end of the hallway, to the room where she had left the materials for the chamber two days earlier.

"Hi Daddy," Luke said as he saw his father in the room.

Vader turned around to see his wife and son behind him. “Good morning,” he said. “Did you sleep well?” he asked.

Luke nodded, his eyes riveted on the interesting device that stood half built in the room. “What is that?” he asked.

Vader looked back at the chamber. *How do I explain it to you, little one?*

“It is a special....room,” he said at last. “the only place where I can take off my mask and breathe.”

Luke’s eyes widened at his father’s words. “You can take off your mask?” he asked in wonder. “Can I see your face, Daddy?”

Vader looked at Padmé, not knowing how to respond to his son’s request. Padmé merely smiled at him.

“Perhaps when it is finished,” Vader told the boy at last, hoping that he would forget altogether. ‘But it doesn’t seem like that will happen soon,’ he added. “the room isn’t wide enough.”

“Oh?” Padmé said, looking at the room critically. “It is awfully small,” she conceded.

“I was thinking we could knock down this wall,” Vader told her. “I know Dormé sleeps there, but perhaps we could find somewhere else for her to sleep.”

Padmé nodded as she thought about this. “Perhaps we can switch rooms, her and I,” she suggested tentatively. “I wouldn’t mind sharing a room with you,” she added with a smile.

Vader smiled under his mask. “That’s very generous of you, Padmé,” he told her.

Dormé knew better than to question her mistress about her reasons for wanting to switch rooms. She figured it had something to do with Vader, but couldn’t imagine what. *Surely they cannot resume... marital relations*, she thought, *not with him in that suit...* So why did they want to switch rooms?

“Excuse me, Miss Dormé,” Threepio asked, entering the kitchen where Dormé was cleaning up after breakfast. “But Mistress Padmé and Master Ani need to know if there are any of your belongings left in your room before the wall is knocked down.”

“They’re knocking down the wall??” Dormé asked in shock. “Why??”

“To make room for the hyperbaric chamber, of course,” Threepio replied matter-of-factly. “More space is required, that is why they asked you to move to another room.”

“But where will Padmé sleep?” she asked.

“I imagine she will sleep in the same room as her husband,” Threepio replied, and then left the room.

Dormé frowned. *Her husband? Who are you kidding, Padmé...your husband died five years ago... Vader is a cyborg, not a man. What kind of husband do you expect he will be?*

By evening, the wall had been taken down, and the chamber had been completed. Luke had stayed with his father the whole day, fascinated by the entire process. Vader sensed that

his son shared his love of building and mechanics, and encouraged him to help whenever he felt it appropriate to do so. Luke had been thrilled to help.

“What an impressive piece of engineering,” Threepio said as he, the twins and Padmé stood admiring the finished chamber. “Although I’m certain I could have built it myself had Master Ani not insisted upon doing it himself.”

Vader merely looked at the droid, and then at Padmé, and shook his head in disbelief. Padmé stifled her laughter, trying to spare the droid’s feelings.

“How does it work?” Leia asked. “And what is it for?”

“This is where Daddy sleeps,” Padmé explained. “You see, when he is in there, he can remove his mask and breathe without need of it.”

Leia looked up at her father. Although she loved him as he was, she had longed to see his face, just as her brother did.

“Can we see your face?” she asked her father.

Vader hesitated before replying. Padmé had accepted the way he looked, but his children were a different matter. Would they be frightened of his disfigurements? *How could they not be? You are a monster now...*

“I don’t know, Leia,” Vader replied, trying to sound gentle. “I’m not exactly pretty under it,” he added, trying to lighten the mood.

“We don’t care what you look like,” Luke said, speaking for his twin as well. “We want to see you anyway.”

Vader looked at Padmé. “What do you think?” he asked her.

“It’s up to you,” she said. “But I know it would mean a lot to them, Ani. It won’t change the way they feel about you, that I can promise you.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“Because it didn’t change the way I feel,” she replied.

Vader nodded, her words touching his heart. “Very well,” he said. “Then I will show you.”

Vader stepped into the chamber and sat down, motioning for his children to come closer. Padmé took each of them by the hand and walked over to the chamber. She felt their hands tighten on hers as the metallic claw descended from the top of the chamber and attached itself to the top of Vader’s helmet. The mask was detached from the collar, and slowly the device rose upward, revealing the face of Anakin Skywalker.

Vader took a deep breath, delighted to be free of the mask at last. He turned his eyes to his children, almost afraid to see the expression on their faces when they saw the ravages of his once handsome visage.

Luke and Leia stood holding their mother’s hand, looking in astonishment to their father’s face. It was not what they expected, but the look in his eyes, the warmth and love that emanated from his brilliant blue eyes was all they needed to reassure them that this man before them was their father, and that he loved them with all his being.

Vader could sense their fascination, their amazement and their acceptance, and he smiled at them. *The first smile I've ever given my children*, he reflected. Luke and Leia smiled back, and let go of Padmé's hand. They walked over to their father, approaching him carefully.

"It's alright," he told them, grateful that for once his voice did not sound so menacing. "Come closer."

The twins stepped up to him, their eyes never leaving his. Each of them reached up to him, and when he felt their tiny hands upon his face, the tears he had held back with such difficulty finally broke through.

"Don't cry, Daddy," Leia told him, brushing a tear from his cheek.

Vader could not speak, and merely pulled each of his children into his embrace, his heart more full than he could ever imagine possible.

Padmé stood back, her own tears flowing as she witnessed the moving scene before her. When the twins kissed their father, she knew that no matter what he may have done in the past, he was theirs now. His heart belonged to them now, and no one in the galaxy would ever change that.

Chapter 18

"You must be tired, having had so little sleep last night," Padmé said as she and Vader left their children's room later that night.

Vader nodded. "I am," he said. "It's been a long 48 hours."

Padmé frowned. "Have you given any more thought to what I suggested back on the ship? About getting your injuries repaired?"

"Yes, I've thought a lot about it," he told her as they walked down the corridor. "But I wouldn't begin to know how to inquire about such a thing, Padmé. Do you?"

"Well, it will require some digging around, but I can do that now that you have so thoughtfully provided me with a computer," she said giving him a smile. "There are bound to be facilities that have developed this technique I told you of. All we need to do is find one."

"And find a way to get there without the emperor learning of what we are doing," Vader reminded her. "If he does, I don't need to tell you what he will do, Padmé."

"No, you don't," she said with a frown. 'At any rate, you need to get some sleep,' she said, linking her arm through his. "You haven't slept in at least 48 hours now, have you?"

"I can't deny that," he replied. "And quite an eventful 48 hours it has been," he added.

"Yes, I can imagine," she said as they entered the large room that they shared. "How much have you eaten in that time?" she asked.

"I took some nourishment before I left the *Exactor*," he replied. "Eating isn't exactly easy for me," he added somewhat embarrassedly.

"I'm sure it is," she replied. "So how will you... I mean, does the chamber provide you..." she felt awkward asking him questions about his unusual physical requirements.

"It does," he replied. "Intravenously only. If I want to eat real food, it requires some doing. You've seen how the top half of the mask is removed; the bottom part requires the assistance of a droid, and is far more difficult to reattach. Most of the time I cannot be bothered, and so I have become accustomed to relying on nourishment provided intravenously."

"Anakin, you can't go long on that sort of food," she replied. "Would you let me help you?" she asked tentatively. "I could get you something from the kitchen..."

Vader wasn't sure how to respond. The thought of eating real food appealed to him greatly, for it had been well over 24 hours since he had taken anything remotely resembling food. It touched him that Padmé wanted to help him, even though it still embarrassed him that he required help from anyone. *But she wants to be a part of your life, are you really going to turn her away??*

"Thank you, Padmé," he said at last. "I would appreciate that very much."

Padmé stood in front of the open refrigerator, trying to decide what to bring upstairs. Anakin had always had a tremendous appetite...*in many respects*, she reflected. What would be easy for him to eat? If he were not accustomed to eating solid food, then perhaps it would be better to keep it plain, bland...yet, perhaps he would enjoy something with a little more taste to it, since he was accustomed to not tasting anything. Finally she ended up bringing him a variety of offerings, deciding to let him choose what was best.

Upon returning upstairs, Padmé found the chamber closed, and realized that he was removing his helmet in the safety of his oxygen enriched atmosphere. The internal sensors alerted him to her presence, and he opened the chamber. Turning to her, he was surprised to see the tray of food she brought with her.

“You don’t think I can eat all that do you Padmé?” he asked with a smile.

Padmé smiled, his smile and the playful twinkle in his eyes almost making her forget about their present circumstances. *I have always loved his eyes*, she thought wistfully.

“No, of course not,” she replied. ‘I just wasn’t sure what you’d like,’ she said. “This way you have a lot of choice.”

Vader nodded. “Yes, I appreciate that,” he said.

“Good,” she said, setting down the tray. “Now, tell me what to do.”

Padmé listened carefully as Vader instructed her step by step how to remove the lower portion of his mask. It was an intricate piece of technology, but Padmé was a patient woman. More than that, she was motivated.

Finally she gently removed the lower portion of the mask and set it down carefully. Vader rubbed his chin, relieved to be free of the restrictive gear.

“It must be a relief to take that off,” she commented as she picked up the tray and handed it to him.

“Yes, very much so,” he replied. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve felt like I would go mad from claustrophobia,” he added.

Padmé frowned. “I’m sure,” she said softly. “I will let you eat, I’m sure you must need this closed to maximize the oxygen content.”

“Regretfully, that is true,” he told her. ‘Thank you, Padmé,’ he said. “This was very kind of you.”

Padmé turned back to him as she walking to the fresher. “You don’t need to thank me, Ani; I’m your wife.”

Vader nodded, more moved by the simple gesture than he could say.

Padmé left the chamber, hearing it close behind her, trying not to think contemplate too much the complexity of her life now that she and Anakin were back together. *Not back together, not really... we share a room, but we are worlds apart...* She headed for the fresher across the hall and proceeded to get ready for bed.

Padmé left the fresher with a yawn, feeling worn out by the day's events. *Has he finished eating?* She wondered looking at the chamber. She returned to the fresher and got a glass of water, and then headed over to the chamber. It began to open and she stood back.

"That was fantastic," Vader said.

Padmé smiled. "I'm glad," she said, handing him a glass of water,

Vader took it from her. "Thanks," he said. He took a long drink, relishing the refreshing, cold sensation as it slid down his throat.

Padmé watched him, pleased that he'd taken another step towards recovering his humanity. She picked up the tray and set it outside on the floor.

"Feel better now?" she asked.

He nodded content for now merely to look at her. Her beauty was more striking now that he was able to look at her with his own eyes; somehow it didn't surprise him that the mask Sidious had furnished him with deprived him of the ability to sense the most subtle nuances of her face; the silken texture of her skin, the fullness of her lips, the delicate scent of her hair.

"You're so beautiful," he said finally, feeling compelled to tell her.

Padmé smiled. "Thank you," she said.

The tension between them was almost palpable; both of them longing for the other, yet neither of them having the courage to take the initiative.

"It's so good to see your smile again," she said at last. "I've missed it."

Vader nodded. "I've missed you," he said softly, reaching up and touching her face, wishing he could feel her skin under his fingertips.

Padmé closed her eyes, even the most superficial touch from him leaving her wanting more. Opening her eyes again, she tentatively moved toward him, uneasy around all the high tech equipment, and yet desperate to be closer to him. Vader could sense her longing, and took her hand, inviting her closer, until she ended up sitting on his thigh. Desire coursed through his veins as he felt her upon him, for this was one part of his body that was still fully human.

They didn't speak, neither of them quite knowing what to say. Instead they spoke with their eyes, with their hands. Padmé took his face between her hands, caressing his scarred cheeks tenderly. He looked into her eyes, and then down to her mouth, wanting her, needing her. Slowly she brought her face to his, her mouth seeking his, and they met in a feather soft kiss.

Vader was shocked that she would want to do such a thing, that she would want *him*; but he could not deny the feelings he felt radiating from her, nor the look in her eyes. But more than the shock, he felt desire. This smallest touch, the smallest hint of a kiss, and yet it had set his blood afire with longing. Without considering if it was right or wrong, he kissed her again. But this time it was different. This was not the uncertain, whisper of a kiss; this kiss echoed the very depths of his need for her, and she responded in kind. For that moment, it was as though there were no impediments to their union; there was not painful past, no uncertain future; only a man and a woman and the depth of the love and desire for one another.

Vader ran his hands into her glorious tresses, his mouth rediscovering hers. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck, wishing she could touch him, longing to feel his skin next to hers. She gasped when she felt his mouth upon her throat, kissing it just the way she'd always loved.

"Ani," she sighed, tears springing to her eyes at the power of the emotions she was feeling.

"I need you so much, Padmé," he said into her ear. "You make me wild, you always have."

Padmé closed her eyes, never wanting this moment to end, but knowing that he was too caught up in it to stop. She didn't want to stop either, but she knew that what they were doing would only end in frustration when the reality of their present situation came crashing down around them.

Finally she pulled back. "I hate for this to end," she said, stroking his face gently with the back of her hands. "But maybe we ought to."

Vader nodded, hating to stop as much as she did. "Yes, you're right," he said, realizing that his breath was becoming labored.

Padmé's eyes filled with tears as she too noticed how his breathing had been compromised.

"It won't always be this way, Ani," she told him. "I *will* find a way, I promise you."

Vader sighed deeply. "I hope so, Padmé," he replied, his voice growing hoarse.

Padmé nodded. "I'd better leave," she said, standing up. "You need this closed."

Vader let her go, watching her as she stood up. He took her hand and kissed her wrist, feeling her racing pulse under her skin. "Goodnight my angel," he said.

"Goodnight," she replied, giving him one last smile before she stepped out of the chamber.

Vader watched her cross the room to her bed before he closed the chamber, his body filled with unfulfilled longing.

Padmé heard the chamber close behind her, and finally released the emotions that had built up within her. Hot tears rolled down her face as she was filled with grief for Anakin, the longing and need she felt for him and frustration

of knowing that their physical relationship had definite limits on it. It may be months before they could be together, *perhaps it would never happen... no... I can't think that*, she told herself resolutely. *I will find a way and I won't stop until I do.*

Vader sat with his face in his hands, taking deep breaths in the oxygen enriched pod. Her kiss had surprised him; her desire for him had astounded him. *There must be a way*, he thought desperately. *There has to be a way—I cannot go on this way, I refuse to live like this any more.*

Chapter 19

CHAPTER 19

It is late in the day, only one more message to reply to. It's been such a long day. Suddenly I feel someone behind me and before I can turn to see who it is, I feel a kiss on my neck. I jump out of my chair and turn around, furious with whoever is there. I stop when I see who it is.

"ANI!!" I shriek and rush at him. He lifts me up as I wrap my arms around his neck and cover his face in kisses. Oh, he's here, he's really here! I don't want to let him go; just the scent of him is intoxicating.

I babble like an idiot, telling him everything at once, as he stands there holding me in his arms. Finally he set me down on the edge of the desk and smiles at me, that smile that makes my knees grow weak. He takes my face in his hands. I sigh under his touch. "Hi," he says with a smile

"Hi," I manage to reply. .

"Did I surprise you?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes, you did," I reply. . "But what a wonderful surprise."

"I thought you might like that," he says, pulling my face to his and kissing me on the mouth. My hands snake their way through his hair as our kiss intensifies, each of us releasing the tension of the past 5 weeks without the other. His hands find their way to the front of my gown, and he begins to unfasten it. I let him, and allow him to push me back onto the desk as his mouth makes its way down to my throat, pressing hot kisses. My mind is telling me I need to stop him, but my body has other ideas. 'Ani,' I sigh. "Ani we can't do this... not here..."

Padmé woke up with a start. She'd heard someone shouting, and she realized that it was Anakin. *He's in trouble*, she thought, jumping out of bed and rushing to the chamber. Using the activation device that Vader had pointed out to her, she opened the chamber. Expecting to find the worst, she wasn't prepared for the sight that she was about to face.

"You will not take her from me!!" Vader shouted angrily, his gloved fists clenched tightly. The rage in his face terrified Padmé, and yet she felt compelled to help him from his nightmare.

"You will pay for it, Kenobi!" he roared. "Stay away from my family!"

"Anakin, wake up!" she said, shaking his arm in an effort to wake him up.

Vader's eyes snapped open, and Padmé was horrified to see that they were Sith yellow.

"Anakin, let it go!" she implored as flashbacks of that day on Mustafar assaulted her mind.

He looked up at her as the dream began to fade. As it did so, his anger abated, and his eyes gradually resumed their natural shade of blue. Padmé sighed with relief to see the change. "A

bad dream?" she asked.

He nodded a frown still on his brow. "Kenobi," he said simply, uttering the name as though it were poison in his mouth.

Padmé merely nodded, understanding completely the source of his anger. "He doesn't know where we are," she assured him, stroking his face gently. "He never will."

"I wish I could believe that," he said. "But somehow I doubt it."

"You don't think Dormé said anything to him, do you?" she asked.

"If she hasn't already, then she may do so after the confrontation we had," he replied. "At any rate, we must be prepared to leave this place, Padmé. Until the emperor is dead, we aren't safe anywhere for long."

Padmé felt herself grow cold at the thought of Sidious chasing them across the galaxy. Would they ever be safe again? "But he thinks you're dead, doesn't he?" she asked.

"He may believe it for now, but I don't think he will be fooled for long," he replied. "Forgive me, beloved. I don't mean to frighten you, but it's best that you understand how serious our situation is."

Padmé nodded. "I understand, Anakin," she replied. "I will do whatever it takes to protect our children."

"So will I," he replied. "Even if it means killing Kenobi to do so."

Padmé was chilled to hear him pronounce his former master's death sentence so calmly. *Yes, he was Anakin in many respects. When he is with his children, he is completely Anakin Skywalker; yet there was still a very large part of him who was Darth Vader. I must not forget that, she told herself. As much as he loves us, he is still a Sith, a Sith who would kill without compunction to protect us all.*

"Try to sleep, Ani," she said, kissing his brow softly. "You need to sleep."

Vader couldn't help but agree. "I will try," he said, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Padmé kissed him once more and then left, hearing the chamber close again behind her. She returned to her own bed, certain that she too would have difficulty sleeping any more that night.

Planet Delaya— morning

Padmé sat at the computer screen that Threepio had helped her install in her room, a cup of tea in one hand. She had been up early, too restless to stay in bed long after dawn. Her search for organ regeneration centers had proven to be more difficult than she had imagined it would be. The technology was still quite new, and it seemed not a lot of medical centers were equipped with either the technology or the staff to affect such a radical treatment. There were a few, however, and Padmé was determined to find them.

She had not been able to stop thinking about the moment of passion that she had shared with Anakin the previous night. It had been so frustrating to put an end to it, to leave off where ordinarily things would have heated up. *We could never get enough of each other, she*

remembered with a smile. *The passion was always so deep, so intense between us.* It seemed as though that were still very much the case; except now they could not fully express this passion. She knew that Anakin had been as frustrated as she had been, probably more so since it was his physical limitation that was the impediment. *But that will change,* she vowed, renewing her search. *I will not let him live the rest of his life like this...*

Padmé's eyes stopped their scanning when she saw a name that nearly jumped off the screen at her. *Polis Massa.* She remembered that medical facility well, for it was where she had given birth to the twins, and also where Obi-Wan Kenobi had broken the news to her that Anakin was dead. *The liar!*

From behind her Padmé heard the sound of the hyperbaric chamber opening, and then the familiar sound of Vader's breathing. She turned to greet him.

"Good morning," she said, watching him as he approached her.

"Good morning," he replied. "You're up very early, my lady."

Padmé shrugged. "I couldn't sleep very well," she told him. "Too much going on in my head."

"I know that feeling well," he replied, sitting down on the end of her bed. "What is that you're reading about?" he asked.

Padmé turned back to the screen. "Organ regeneration," she told him. "I think I may have found a place, Ani."

Vader leaned forward to see the screen. "Really? Where?"

"Polis Massa," she replied, moving back so he could read the screen.

"I don't believe I've heard of it," Vader told her, sitting back.

"Polis Massa is a small, yet highly sophisticated medical facility in the Outer Rim," she explained. "It is where Luke and Leia were born, actually, and where Palpatine found out that I am still alive."

Vader frowned under his mask, the thought of his former master tracking down his wife angering him. "He will never find you, Padmé," he vowed. "I swear to you!"

"I know," she said, trying to calm him. "But hear me out, Ani. Palpatine sent operatives to Polis Massa a few months back looking for information about me. He found it, and that's why he knows I'm alive. Ironically, it was also the reason that Obi-Wan finally told me that you are alive too."

"How magnanimous of him," Vader replied bitterly.

"But since Palpatine has already been to Polis Massa, and found what he was looking for, does it make sense that he'd not think to return there?" she asked him. "You know him better than me; does that sound reasonable to you?"

Vader considered her line of reasoning. No doubt if Palpatine had been searching for information, then the 'agents' he sent were masters of interrogation, and would stop at nothing to find the information they sought, even going to the extreme measure of using mind

probes to find it. Whatever sentient life had been there had no doubt been reduced to a vegetative state after a visit from Palpatine's minions; no, he would have no further use for the facility.

"Yes, it does," he replied at last. "What are you thinking, Padmé? You think this facility could repair my injuries?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "Isn't it worth looking into?"

"Just so long as your investigation is done surreptitiously," he cautioned her. "If Palpatine catches wind of it, none of us will be safe from him."

Padmé nodded thoughtfully. "Then we definitely need some help," she replied. 'I have an idea,' she said. "And I think I know just who to ask for it."

Chapter 20

CHAPTER 20

Planet Alderaan

"I can't believe what you're telling me, Bail," Breha Organa said as they sat down together to catch the evening news. "You're telling me that Darth Vader has changed??"

Bail nodded as he turned to look at his wife. "Yes, I know it's hard to believe, but it's true," he told her. "If you had seen the way he is with his kids, Breha, the way they adore him, you'd be as convinced as I am that he is changing."

"And Padmé? What are things like between them?" Breha asked.

"Like you'd expect between any married couple," he replied. "It's obvious that they adore one another; I tell you Breha, if anyone can redeem Darth Vader, it's Padmé and those twins. He is a different man when he is around them."

Breha shook her head in amazement. "I suppose anything is possible," she commented. "Look, they're talking about him right now on the news."

Bail turned his attention to the screen and listened with his wife to the report of the death of Lord Darth Vader, commander of the Imperial Fleet. Bail smiled to himself. *He managed to pull it off after all...*

"I think I need to pay a visit to Delaya," he said to his wife. "To make sure that this news isn't true."

"What makes you think it isn't?" she asked.

"Vader was planning on staging his own death, or at least the appearance of his death; it looks like he did it," Bail replied. "I just want to make sure he managed it, and that he isn't really dead. Besides, I wanted to check up on Padmé and see if she is making out okay. That place was a sorry sight when we arrived, Breha. I was mortified."

Breha shook her head. "Well no one has lived in that cottage for more than twenty years, Bail; what did you expect?"

Bail shrugged. "Well, it came in handy," he replied. "I'm sure Padmé has managed to make it livable."

"Yes, I'm sure she has," Breha replied. "But it's probably not a bad idea to bring her some supplies just in case."

"Good idea," Bail replied. "I'll get right on that so I can leave in the morning."

Planet Hannas II

Vader is dead... his ship blown to bits in the Garos IV System... Obi-Wan had read the news reports on the holonet, but still couldn't believe it. He had fought along side Anakin

Skywalker many, many times, and had known no better pilot in the galaxy. How was it possible that he had perished in a dogfight with a few rebel pilots? The news report said he was greatly outnumbered, but that could simply be Imperial propaganda, making Vader look like a hero. *Or maybe it's all a ruse*, Kenobi thought. *But to what end?? But if it is true, does Padmé know?* He remembered her anger when she had found out that Vader was alive. It still boggled his mind to think that she was still able to love him after all that he'd done to her. *It's Anakin she loves, not Vader... if she ever knew Vader, she'd realize he's nothing but a monster now, incapable of loving anyone.* And now he was dead, truly dead.

Kenobi had kept the letter that Dormé had left for him, and had read it several times over the past couple of weeks. Would Padmé want to see him? Would she have got over her anger by now and be willing to accept his protection again? She would need it now that Palpatine knew she lived; even with Vader dead, he still threatened her safety. *I vowed to protect you, Padmé, you and your children. Like it or not, that's what I intend to do.* Delaya was in the Core, however, which was rather far from where he was. Clearly he could not travel on public transportation, for if he were discovered alive, the Empire would not hesitate to imprison or kill him as they had done to all the other Jedi. No, he was the last hope for the Skywalker children in the galaxy, so he had to see to his own safety as well as theirs. *This poses a rather problematic situation*, he mused, stroking his graying beard thoughtfully. *But I will find a way to get there. Come hell or high water, I will get to Delaya.*

Planet Alderaan

Nejaa Halcyon had managed to reach Alderaan disguised as a merchant of rare gems. Using the Force to bend the minds of lesser beings, he had managed to land on the planet, and had made his way to the royal palace.

"Is the Viceroy expecting you?"

"Yes, he is," Nejaa said, manipulating the security guards mind easily. "In fact, he is quite anxious to see me, so I suggest you make haste and show me in."

"Right this way, sir."

Bail Organa was in his office just preparing to leave when a visitor entered the room.

"Viceroy Organa?"

Bail nodded, looking the oddly dressed man up and down. "Yes, who are you? And how did you get past my security?" he asked, his alarm growing.

Nejaa lowered his hood. "My name is Nejaa Halcyon," he said, stepping towards Organa. "Jedi Knight."

Organa's eyes widened. "Jedi Knight?" he repeated.

Nejaa nodded. "Yes," he said. "I've come to you with some rather important information."

"Information about what?" Organa asked, still in a state of shock over seeing Halcyon alive.

"Information about Darth Vader," he replied. "Or should I say, Anakin Skywalker."

Organa raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You've seen him lately?"

Nejaa nodded. "Indeed I have," he replied. "In fact, just two days ago in the Garos System. He is not the Sith Lord I expected, Viceroy. He is on his way to redemption, and I need to alert Masters Yoda and Kenobi. I thought you might be able to tell me where they are."

Organa hesitated before he replied. *It was clear how Kenobi felt about Vader; would the word of a fellow Jedi be enough to change his mind? How can I take that chance?*

"I am going to see Vader and his family this very morning," Organa told him, not answering the Jedi's question. "Why don't you come with me?"

Nejaa was surprised by the Viceroy's response. Obviously he already knew about Vader's metamorphosis, as well as his family. *It seemed that the Viceroy had been convinced of the good in Darth Vader, he reflected. So what happened on Garos IV was not an isolated incident; the good man who had been Anakin Skywalker was returning... but I must be absolutely sure before I can dare contact the other Jedi. If this is a trap, then Kenobi and Yoda will surely be hunted down and destroyed. If Vader truly is the Chosen One, then he must destroy the Sith; merely abandoning the Dark Side is not enough... but he won't be able to do it alone...*

"Yes, I will come with you," he told Organa at last. "I thank you, Viceroy."

Later that afternoon— Planet Delaya

"Daddy, why do you need to wear a mask?" Leia asked as she, Luke and Vader walked along the path outside the house. The sun was high in the sky, streams of bright light piercing through the forest canopy above their heads.

Vader wasn't quite sure how to respond. No doubt the truth of what had befallen him on Mustafar would scare and horrify his children; *no doubt Kenobi has managed to worm his way into their lives and they would be traumatized to learn his true nature.*

"I cannot breathe very well without it," Vader told his child at last. "I had an accident a few years back, on the day you were born as a matter of fact. Since then I have had to wear this mask and this suit."

The twins absorbed this information thoughtfully. Both of them had suffered from troubling dreams since they had met their father; yet they were not old enough to realize that their dreams were actually visions of what had happened to him.

"You were in a fire, weren't you?" Luke asked at last.

Vader turned and looked down at his son. "Yes, son," he told him. "That's right. Have you had visions of what happened to me?"

Luke nodded. "Yes," he replied. "So has Leia. They are scary, Daddy. It makes me cry when I think about that."

"Me too," Leia put in, squeezing her father's hand tighter. "Mommy says that you can get help, that doctors can fix your breathing. Is that true?"

"I hope so," Vader responded. "Nothing would make me happier than to take this suit off for good."

"It will happen, Daddy," Luke said. "I just know it."

Vader smiled, amazed by his young son's insightfulness. His Force sense was already so strong, as was Leia's; it would be challenging to hide them from Sidious indefinitely. *That is why Sidious must die... and soon... I will never let him near these precious little ones, not if it means sacrificing my own life to protect them. I will not hesitate to do so.*

"Look, Daddy!" Leia said, pointing upward. "A ship!"

Vader looked up and saw a shuttle heading towards the landing platform. He recognized the configuration as being that of the royal family of Alderaan. *Organa*, he thought.

"Come," he said to his children. "Let's get back to the house. We have visitors."

By the time Vader and the twins had arrived back at the house, the visitors had arrived. Vader was not surprised to see Bail Organa; however had not expected to see the viceroy's companion: Nejaa Halcyon.

"Viceroy," Vader said, nodding to Organa. "It is good to see you. And you as well, Nejaa."

Halcyon merely nodded in response to Vader's comment, for his mind was elsewhere; he could not take his eyes from the young children who held on tight to Vader's massive gloved hands, and who looked up at him with such adoration. As if this wasn't remarkable enough, the Force sense that emanated from the children was incredible; stronger than any Nejaa had ever sensed from such young children, rivaling even fully trained Jedi in its intensity. *Truly they are the children of the Chosen One*, he reflected in amazement.

"You too, Anakin," Nejaa replied. "These must be your children," he said, looking back at Luke and Leia.

Vader looked down at his children, putting a hand on each of their heads gently. "Yes, this is Leia and Luke. Children, this is Nejaa Halcyon. He and I have known one another for a long time, haven't we Nejaa?"

Nejaa nodded. "Indeed we have," he said. "Your father and I served together in the Clone Wars many years ago. I've never known a greater pilot or a braver warrior than him."

Luke and Leia looked up at their father, their admiration and pride for him evident in their faces.

"What brings you to Delaya?" Vader asked. "Is there something wrong?"

Organa shook his head. "No, I just wanted to check in on you all," he said. "Make sure the rumors were not true."

"Ah," Vader replied. "So my ruse worked, then,"

"Yes, it's all over the holonet," Organa replied. "Whatever you did, it was rather spectacular."

"Just a little trick I learned as a padawan," Vader replied casually, earning a grin from Nejaa.

"Bail! What a surprise!"

The three men turned to see Padmé.

“Hello, Padmé,” Organa said. “Just coming to see if there’s anything you need.”

“That’s s very kind of you,” she said with a smile. “Please come in and sit down.”

“Padmé, this is Nejaa Halcyon,” Vader told her. “You remember his name I’m sure.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I certainly do,” she said, turning to the Jedi. “It’s nice to meet you at last, Master Halcyon.”

Nejaa smiled. “Please, call me Nejaa, Senator,”

“And you call me Padmé,” she returned. “I haven’t been a senator for quite some time now.”

“Very well then, Padmé,” Nejaa replied as they sat down together. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.” *This is so bizarre* he thought as he sat down across from Vader, who held his son on his lap. His daughter sat next to him, not wanting to be far from him. *How can this be? How is it possible that this is the same man who slaughtered Jedi without compunction?*

“You’ve done a wonderful job fixing up the place,” Organa commented, looking around the cozy cottage. “It looks fantastic.”

“Well, I did have a lot of help,” Padmé said, looking at her husband. “Ani sent half a cargo hold full of supplies for us.”

“And lots of toys!” Leia piped up.

Nejaa smiled. “Is that so?” he asked her. “Your father must love you a great deal.”

“He does,” Leia averred. “He’s the best father in the galaxy,” she added, looking up at him with adoration.

Nejaa shook his head. “You do realize what all this means, don’t you Anakin?”

“What do you mean?” Vader asked, not bothering to comment on the use of his real name.

“It means that you are abandoning the Darkness,” Nejaa replied. “No Sith could elicit the kind of love your children have for you.”

Vader reflected on the Jedi’s words thoughtfully. He could not deny that he had changed since finding his family again; their love for him and his for them had changed him irrevocably. Yet, deep within him he still felt the stirring of anger, of hatred; he lusted for revenge upon his master, upon Kenobi. If he was rejecting the Dark Side, then why did he still have this need for revenge?

“I’m glad you’re here, Bail,” Padmé said, sensing Vader’s discomfort. “We need your help.”

“Oh? With what?” Bail asked.

Padmé looked at Vader. “We need you to get us transport to Polis Massa.”

Chapter 21

“Children, why don’t you find Threepio and Artoo and ask them to take you outside while Mommy and Daddy talk to the Viceroy and Master Halcyon?” suggested Padmé gently.

Luke and Leia agreed, rather reluctantly, and left the adults in search of the two droids. Once they were gone, Padmé sat down beside her husband and returned her attention to Organa.

“Did you say Polis Massa?” Organa asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she said. ‘They have one of the most advanced medical facilities in the quadrant,’ she told him. “Including organ regeneration technology.”

Organa nodded as he began to understand what Padmé was getting at. “You mean to get your injuries repaired,” he said, looking at Vader.

“If it is possible,” Vader replied. “Then yes. The emperor told me that they were beyond repair; considering how he deceived me about my wife and children, I think it’s entirely possible that he lied about that too.”

“A sound assumption,” Nejaa replied. “Palpatine is a ruthless, evil man. If he felt that keeping you in this condition would serve his purposes, then he would keep the truth from you most definitely.”

“That’s exactly what I think has happened,” Padmé put in. “Palpatine wants Anakin to exist this way, in pain and isolation,” she said, looking at Vader, taking his hand in hers.

Nejaa nodded. “Yes, that would be the way of the Sith,” he concurred. “That would keep Anakin in the Darkness.”

Vader nodded. “Yes, he has seen to it that I am more machine than man,” he commented bitterly.

“What happened to you, Anakin?” Nejaa asked. “How did all of this happen?”

Vader turned to Padmé before he responded. Speaking of Mustafar was a very painful topic for both of them; but if these men were going to help, they needed to know all the details.

“Kenobi and I fought,” Vader began, not going into the details that had lead up to the fateful duel. ‘He had the advantage of position, and when I tried to take it from him, he cut off my limbs below the joint,’ he said, the pain in his phantom limbs still very much there. “I was left on the shore of a river of lava, and within moments my clothes caught fire. I was engulfed in fire. Kenobi watched me burn, even had the audacity to tell me that he loved me, that I was his brother; and then he left me. Left me to burn in agony.”

Padmé felt his hand tighten on hers as he relived the horrors of that day. Her own anger at Kenobi flashed through her as she thought of how he had lied to her about that day, how he had come to her, so broken hearted, telling her that the man she loved had died. *You didn’t tell*

me how you'd left him to burn, did you Obi-Wan? You conveniently left that part of the story out.

"Master Kenobi should have killed you rather than let you suffer that way," Nejaa declared at last, a frown on his brow. "That would have been the compassionate thing to do."

Vader snorted. "Compassion? What makes you think compassion was anywhere in his mind when he did that to me?" he asked angrily. "He used my wife to find me, sneaking on board her ship like a coward. Was that an act of compassion??"

Organa was hearing the details of what had happened on Mustafar for the first time as well. Of course he'd heard Obi-Wan's version of it; but he realized now that the Jedi Master had left out much of the details.

"Will you help us, Bail?" Padmé asked at last, linking her arm through Vader's, trying to soothe him.

Organa nodded. "Yes, I will," he said. "What is your plan?"

Padmé and Vader looked at one another, relieved and excited that their plans were starting to fall into place.

"I imagine they will need to examine Ani first," Padmé replied, "to determine the extent of the damage, as well as to take samples of his cells in order to start the regeneration process."

"This sounds like it will take a long time," Organa said. "Are you prepared for that?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, anything is better than living like this."

"I'm sure," Organa agreed. "Well, then we need to get you there as soon as possible so they can begin. Will you go with him, Padmé?"

"I'd like to," she said, "but I don't like the idea of bringing the children all that way. I don't trust Dormé alone with them anymore," she added, frowning.

"I will stay with them," Nejaa offered. "They will need protection from the emperor," he added.

"We would appreciate that very much, Nejaa," Padmé said. "I know they will be well protected in your care."

"I can contact Captain Antilles to come and bring the two of you to Polis Massa this evening if you wish," Organa said. "If you have a comm. station that I can use to contact Alderaan."

"Follow me," Padmé said, standing up.

Vader watched his wife leave, and then turned back to Nejaa. "I have shielded them from Sidious," he told Nejaa. "Their Force signature is already very strong."

"I noticed," Nejaa replied. "You won't be able to hide them forever, Anakin. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "But Sidious will be dead before he has a chance to harm my family, I promise you that."

“Destroying the Sith is part of the Prophecy, Anakin,” Nejaa replied. “It is your destiny to destroy him.”

“I don’t care about the Prophecy, Nejaa,” Vader replied, standing up and pacing around the small room. “Sidious took everything from me, everyone! I vowed to make him pay for that.”

“Vengeance is the way of the Dark Side, Anakin,” Nejaa warned him. “You must let go of your anger if you are to destroy the Sith, or it will own you forever.”

Let go of my anger?? And how do you expect me to do that?

“Well it’s all arranged,” Padmé said as she returned. “Captain Antilles is on his way.”

Vader turned to her and nodded. “Good,” he replied, holding his hand out to her. “You realize of course that the children will be quite indignant that they are being left behind,” he said.

Padmé smiled. “Yes, I’m sure,” she replied. “But we won’t be gone long.”

Nejaa watched in astonishment at the metamorphosis that had taken place in Anakin before his very eyes. His wife had the ability to quell the tempest within him; his love for her and their children was his lifeline, and the only thing that would enable him to conquer the Darkness once and for all.

Vader was right, Luke and Leia were quite put out that they were not accompanying their parents. Leia in particular was most indignant, just as her father had anticipated. But Padmé managed to convince them that this was all part of a plan that would end in their father being healed, and so they begrudgingly accepted it.

Evening had just settled upon the forest when Captain Antilles lifted off from the landing platform with his passengers on board. Padmé and Vader were uneasy about leaving their children, but they both trusted Nejaa Halcyon completely, and knew that they were in good hands.

“We should arrive at Polis Massa about 0900 hours,” Antilles told them as they sat in the passenger lounge. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you,” Padmé replied. “We ate before we left.”

Antilles nodded. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll let you know when we’ve reached the system. In the meantime, enjoy the trip.”

He left them then and returned to the cockpit.

“Well, looks like it’s just you and I, my lady,” Vader said, putting his arm around Padmé.

She smiled and nestled against him. “Yes, so it seems. I already miss the twins.”

“Me too,” replied. “But they are in good hands, Padmé. Nejaa is a good man; I know he will take good care of them.”

“Yes, and Dormé and the droids are there too,” she reminded him.

“Well, I could do without Dormé,” Vader commented. “But I suppose she is an adequate nanny.”

"She is," Padmé replied. "But once her services are no longer required, I mean to dismiss her. She's crossed the line one too many times, Ani. I won't stand for her negativity."

"I couldn't agree more," He replied. "I just hope that she doesn't attempt to contact Kenobi in our absence."

"I think she knows what would happen if she did that," Padmé said. "As much as she fancies Obi-Wan, I don't think even she would be so foolish."

"She *likes* him?" Vader asked incredulously.

"Yes, I'm sure of it," Padmé replied. "Of course Obi-Wan is totally oblivious," she added.

"He's a eunuch, Padmé, what do you expect?" Vader commented dryly.

Padmé laughed out loud. "Oh he is not," she responded. "Just because he's never been involved with a woman... well, doesn't mean that... well you know what I mean."

Vader was amused by her embarrassment. "No, I don't," he said. "Explain it to me."

Padmé looked up at him, certain that if she were able to see his face she would see that playful twinkle in his eyes that told her he was teasing her. But the mask was impassive, foreboding as ever and gave no hint to the expression on the face beneath it.

"You love to tease me, don't you?" she said at last.

"Yes, I always have," he said. "Kenobi has always been a stickler for the rules. He would never entertain the thought of breaking his vow of celibacy."

"Unlike some Jedi," she put in pointedly.

Vader was silent for a moment. "Well, some Jedi have no choice but to do," he replied.

"No choice?" she questioned.

Vader shook his head. "None whatsoever," he replied. "Completely helpless to resist the charms of beautiful senators," he added.

Padmé smiled. "I see," she replied, enjoying this playful side of him that she had always loved so much.

"Do you really think they'll be able to fix my injuries, Padmé?" he asked, voicing the worry that had been nagging on his mind for days.

"Yes, I really do," she replied. "It might take a while to do it, and it might not be possible for them to do it all at once, but I think in the end you will be fully human again, Ani."

He nodded, considering her words. "I don't want to get my hopes up, Padmé; but the thought of being able to live normally again is almost too good to be true."

"Think of what it will mean, Anakin," she said. "You can eat whatever you want, whenever you want," she teased.

Vader chuckled. "That actually isn't what is foremost on my mind, Padmé," he told her.

Padmé knew what he was thinking, and blushed slightly. "It's been on my mind too, Anakin," she told him. "I can't stop thinking about the kiss we shared," she admitted. "It was

so wonderful, so beautiful.”

Vader nodded. “It was more than I had ever imagined possible,” he told her.

But it only made me want you more, he thought. Making my frustration level skyrocket.

“It will happen, Ani,” she said, snuggling closer to him. “I know it.”

Vader did not respond, but merely stroked her hair softly, his mind trying not to think of the possibility that she may be wrong.

Chapter 22

Polis Massa

"The Viceroy or Alderaan alerted us that you would be coming," Jorund Gaian said as Vader and Padmé took the seats offered to them. Gaian was the chief administrator of the medical facility. "I have to say I was quite surprised to hear it."

"I'm sure," Padmé replied. "I don't imagine you have had many requests for this sort of procedure."

Gaian shook his head. "No, we haven't," he admitted. "And I must be honest with you, Senator; this procedure is still quite new, and relatively untried."

Vader and Padmé looked at one another. "I think we'll take the risks nonetheless," Vader. "How soon can we begin?"

"Our staff can see you right now for an evaluation," Gaian replied. "Right this way."

Vader and Padmé followed Gaian through a set of blast doors into the medical facility. Every so often they came across an area that had been cordoned off, where repairs were being affected.

"As you can see, we are still recovering from the emperor's... emissaries," Gaian remarked dispassionately. "I'm sorry that they were able to learn of your survival, my lady. We did everything we could to protect you, but there is very little one can do against a mind probe. I lost a great number of personnel that day."

"I'm so sorry," Padmé replied, feeling terrible that she had been the indirect cause of so much wanton destruction.

"It wasn't your doing, Senator," Gaian replied. "It is my experience that men such as Palpatine use people in any way they see fit; they need no excuse to commit acts of unspeakable evil. I'm just relieved that you have managed to stay hidden from him."

"I will see to it that she is always safe," Vader averred, turning to his wife. "I pledge my life to her safety."

Padmé smiled at him, and took his hand. Then she stopped as she noticed something behind him.

"What is it?" he asked.

Padmé pointed to the window behind him which afforded them a view of the operation room within.

"I think Luke and Leia were born in there," she said softly, the sight of the room bringing back all the emotions of that day.

Vader turned and looked. It was so sterile, so cold looking. *And she went through that alone, without me there to comfort her.*

"I wish I had been there with you," he said, not taking his eyes away from the diagnostic table. "I *should* have been there with you, Padmé," he added. I hate the thought of you going through that alone.

"I wasn't alone, Ani," she said.

"No? Who was..." he stopped, realizing who it was that had been there with her while she gave birth to Luke and Leia. "Kenobi," he said simply, jealousy welling up within him. *Kenobi was the first one to hold my precious son, my beautiful daughter... he was there to hold her hand while she gave birth to my children... is that when you told her I was dead, Kenobi? While she labored giving birth to my children?*

Padmé merely nodded. "Come on," she said. "Let's go."

Gaian lead them to another part of the facility and into a room filled with diagnostic material and several beds. Vader had a flashback to the room where he'd been brought after Palpatine had found him on Mustafar, the room he had laid waste to in his anger... **No, she can't be... I felt her! She was alive!! NO!!**

"This is the team of specialists who will be working with you," Gaian explained as the team of physicians and droids looked up at the newcomers. "I will leave you in their capable hands."

"Thank you, administrator," Padmé said. "We appreciate your help."

"My name is Rath Durrion, and this is my colleague Akiva Rool," one of the physicians said to Padmé and Vader. 'We are the lead physicians in this particular branch of medicine here.' He stopped and looked at Vader. "I understand you have some injuries you need attended to."

An understatement... Vader reflected. "Yes I do."

"Well before we can determine what needs to be done, we will need to do a series of tests on you," Doctor Rool said next. She picked up a data pad from the table beside her. "And we will need some information about you and your health history. Shall we start?"

Vader looked at Padmé. "Yes, let's do it," he said.

The four of them sat down around a round table. Padmé reached over and took Vader's hand, sensing his trepidation. He looked at her, grateful for her soothing presence.

"We'll need to start with your vitals," Rool continued. "Age?"

"I'm 27," Vader replied.

"Any history of health disorders before these injuries were incurred?"

"No, nothing."

"What about your parents? Siblings? Any significant health problems there?"

"No."

"Okay, then," Rook said, taking notes. 'Now onto your present condition,' she said. "Can you tell us about what happened to cause these injuries and the particulars of your physical

condition?”

Vader nodded. “It’s a long story,” he said, and then launched into a descriptive narrative of all that had happened on Mustafar, how his injuries had been incurred, what measures had been taken to repair them, and the physical limitations he was forced to endure now as a result of them.

Padmé listened to the details of his horrific ordeal in silent agony. Squeezing his hand tightly, she could almost feel the fires of Mustafar as they consumed him, and cursed the name of Obi-Wan Kenobi again for leaving her beloved there to die amid them.

The physicians were silent as they listened to Vader’s words, taking notes here and there, their expression not changing. It was hard to see what they were thinking, even for Vader. *Was this a lost cause? Was it just too much to hope for?*

After what seemed like an eternity, they spoke. “I think we need to run some tests,” Rool said. “See the extent of your injuries. Only then will we have a clear idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“Very well,” Vader said, standing up. He looked back at Padmé, seeing in her eyes the same trepidation and yet hopeful excitement that he felt within him. “I’ll see you soon,” he told her.

She nodded. “Yes, I’ll be waiting.”

He then turned back and accompanied the two physicians to the examination room, leaving Padmé to wait alone.

Chapter 23

CHAPTER 23

It was with tremendous apprehension that Vader submitted to the tests and examinations necessary to determine the DNA code required to replicate his organs.

He had become accustomed to frequent visits to physicians, to their ministrations. He still had nightmares about the brutality of Sidious' medical droids as they patched together his broken body; no doubt Sidious had given specific orders to show as little compassion as possible. And now it seemed likely that he had been put through that torture unnecessarily.

I'm glad Padmé is not here to see me like this, he thought as he lay on the examination table. The medics had removed his suit, leaving him naked save for a small hospital blanket. *If she saw the mess that my body is now, she would never look at me the same way again...*

"We're going to sedate you now," one of the medical droids told him. "We need to do some internal examinations and gather samples of the organs and tissue we need to regenerate. I'm afraid the procedure is quite painful. But relax, you won't feel a thing."

Vader nodded, his face covered with a ventilator mask. He had already begun to feel the affects of the sedative, and felt his eyelids growing heavy. *Let this work,* he thought sleepily as his body gave way to the sedative. *Let this be the way back to humanity...*

Padmé paced up and down in the lounge, her anxiety level growing with each passing moment. *Why hasn't anyone told me what's going on?? How long is this going to take??* She tried to relax, tried to take her mind off of what Anakin was going through; but it was impossible. *What if they can't do it? What if the damage is just too extensive? What if he doesn't survive the surgery?*

"Excuse me, my lady."

Padmé started and turned around to see Doctor Rool standing there, still in surgical garb.

"Yes?" she asked anxiously. "How is he? How is my husband? Can I see him?"

Rool smiled. "Please, sit down with me."

Padmé's anxiety level shot up. *He's dead... they killed him... his body couldn't stand the shock...* "What is it? Please tell me he's..."

"He's fine," Rool assured her. "He's sleeping. I just wanted to share with you what we have learned, and discuss options with you."

Padmé felt the relief fill her. "You scared me," she admitted. "So what is next? You can help him, right?"

Rool nodded. "Yes, we are willing to try," she said. "He has third degree burns on most of his body, and the skin will need to be replaced; that is easy to do, as well as the limbs. We've had great success replicating limbs and doing skin replacement. The rest isn't so easy. The

damage to his thoracic region is very extensive,' she reported. "His lungs, his heart, his pulmonary branch, larynx have all been damaged beyond repair. They will all have to be completely regenerated."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I figured that much," she said.

"That is the hardest part," Rool said. "And I have to be honest with you; we never regenerated vital organs before. Theoretically the technique will work, but I feel it necessary that you know the risks involved."

"Risks??" Padmé asked, her alarm growing again. "What risks do you mean?"

Rool sighed. "Well, the procedure is very invasive, and very extensive. Depending upon the physical condition of the patient, it could also be life threatening."

"You mean he might die?" Padmé asked numbly.

Rool nodded. "I'm afraid there is a risk," she replied. "I feel compelled to tell you that before you decide to proceed."

Padmé nodded. "It must be his decision too," she said. "When can I see him?"

"I can take you right now."

Padmé walked along with the physician through a set of blast doors into the surgical wing. She could feel the tension growing within her as they approached the room where Vader had been taken several hours earlier. She tried to imagine what she would see, what the injuries he suffered on Mustafar had done to him. But try as she might, nothing could prepare her for the sight that met her eyes as she entered the intensive care unit. Padmé walked to the bed as though in slow motion. *Oh, Anakin...*

Vader was on a surgical bed, his face covered by a ventilator mask. Most of his body was covered with a blanket, but the prosthetic limbs that had been a part of his body for five years were still visible. His shoulders were bare, and though they were still fully human and just as broad and muscular as she remembered them to be; yet they were scarred, red and patchy from the severe burns he had suffered on Mustafar. The doctor had told her most of his body bore such burns; *thank you again, Obi-Wan*, she thought angrily. As she got closer, she noticed that the control box that was a part of his suit was in fact a part of his body, that it was strapped to his chest, with a thick cable entering his torso.

Tentatively, Padmé came to stand beside him, fighting back the tears that threatened. She looked at his face, so peaceful in sleep. Despite the ravages, he was still her Anakin. Without a moment's hesitation, she took one of his hands in hers, not repulsed at all by the mechanical appendage.

"Your husband has remarkable recuperative powers," Doctor Rool commented as she came to stand beside Padmé.

Padmé turned to her. "What makes you say that?" she asked.

"From what he told us, the accident he had to cause all these injuries would have killed most people," Rool replied, looking down at Vader's sleeping form. "And now that I've seen the extent of the damage, I'm truly astonished that he survived at all. The fact that he did is

miraculous, and makes me think he will pull through this procedure just fine, should you decide to go through with it.”

Padmé smiled, as the tears started to spring forth. “I didn’t think of that,” she said softly. “Tell me, do you think his injuries could have been repaired better than they have been?”

Rool nodded. “Undoubtedly,” she stated. “As a matter of fact, we all commented on how poorly his body had been attended to, how the prosthetics used were not the highest quality, nor even customized for his limbs. It seemed that whoever performed the surgery to sustain his life wasn’t interested in the quality of his life, merely that he lives.”

Palpatine Padmé thought angrily, her hatred for him filling her. *I knew it...he never cared about Ani, just the power he could bring him. He didn’t care if that power came from a man or a cyborg.*

“Tell me doctor,” Padmé said at last, turning to the woman. “How soon can you begin the procedure?”

“You’re assuming of course that your husband will want to proceed,” Rool commented.

Padmé looked back at Vader. “Oh I know he will,” she said. “There is no doubt in my mind.”

Rool nodded. “You understand of course that we must hear that from him,” she pointed out.

“Yes, I know,” Padmé replied. “But how soon? How long will it take to regenerate the damaged organs?”

“It’s hard to say,” Rool said. “Most patients I would say a week; but with him, it could be less. I don’t want to make any promises.”

A week?? Ani will be whole in a week?

“Please start as soon as possible,” Padmé said at last. “I don’t want my husband to spend another minute living this way. He has suffered enough.”

Rool nodded. “Right away milady.”

Chapter 24

CHAPTER 24

"You don't need 10000 credits, 2000 will do just fine," Obi-Wan Kenobi said to the shady looking pilot.

The bar was loud and smoky, making it difficult to make oneself heard. *And making it difficult to bend the mind of this particular gran*, Kenobi thought in frustration.

"2000? Are you kidding??" the three-eyed alien laughed. "To take you to the Core? You must be as crazy as they say you are."

"I can get you more when we reach Delaya," Kenobi offered hopefully.

The gran made a noise of derision. "Sure you can," he said. "Listen, I will take you as far as Zolan, and that's being generous. You'll have to make your own way from there."

Well, Zolan is closer to Alderaan than I am now, Kenobi reasoned. "When do we leave?" he asked at last.

Polis Massa

"Ani? Can you hear me?"

Vader opened his eyes slowly, the effects of the sedative still making him groggy. He looked up to see his wife and a physician at his side.

"Padmé," he whispered.

"How do you feel?" she asked, putting a hand on his bare shoulder.

"I've been better," he said. He turned his eyes to the physician. "Well?" he asked simply.

"You're a lucky man, Lord Vader," Rool commented.

"Lucky?" he replied. He looked up at Padmé. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"Your injuries are indeed, grievous; and the damage has been compounded by the inadequate and substandard surgical intervention you were given at the time of your accident. However, I believe you are a perfect candidate for this procedure. The question is, do you want us to proceed?"

"Do you mean... now?" he asked weakly.

"We need to regenerate new organs for you," she explained. "Ordinarily it takes weeks to do so, but I have a hunch that in your case it will take far less time."

"Anakin is a very unique individual," Padmé said. "It wouldn't be surprising at all if that were the case."

"So what will it be then?" Rool asked. "Should we start the regeneration process?"

Vader nodded. "Yes," he said. "Please do so."

"I'll get the technicians to begin at once," Doctor Rool said and then walked away.

"This is so exciting, Anakin," Padmé said with a smile. "Imagine the twins' reaction when they see you!"

Vader nodded. "Yes, it would be quite a surprise for them."

Padmé frowned. "What is it?" she asked, sensing that something was troubling him.

"I... I didn't want you to see me like this, Padmé," he replied, looking away from her.

Padmé brought her hand up to his face and turned him to face her. "I told you once before that the outside doesn't matter much to me," she said. "And I meant it. I love you, Anakin, what is inside of you, not what you look like on the outside."

He smiled at her. "Doctor Rool was correct; I am a lucky man."

Padmé smiled and kissed the top of his head. "You rest now," she told him. "I need to contact Dormé and let her know we'll be longer than we had originally thought."

"Very well," he replied, hating to see her leave. Her presence had always been so comforting, so soothing; and it had always served to help quell the tempestuous storms within him. He closed his eyes, however, knowing that she was right; if he were to survive this surgery, he would need all his strength. So he did his best to relax, and let his body and soul rest, not knowing what to expect next in this the latest adventure of his remarkable life.

Planet Delaya

"It seems that they are going forward with the surgery," Nejaa commented. Dormé had related the message she had received from Padmé earlier that day. Dormé had been surprised that the surgeons were going ahead with the procedure so soon, and hoped for Padmé and the twins' sake that it was a success. Despite what she thought of Darth Vader personally, she knew what he meant to them all. It astonished her how much they loved him, how the children had never shown the smallest amount of fear toward him despite his terrifying façade. Yet, they obviously saw something in him that she could not, *or would not*. There was a special connection that went beyond the normal bond between a father and his children; *must be that Force thing*, she reasoned. *Those Jedi are a very strange lot.*

Dormé nodded, bringing her mind back to the present. "Yes, they are," she said. "Padmé is quite hopeful that it will be completely successful. I hope for her sake that she's right."

Nejaa nodded. "I hope for his sake as well," he said. "He has already endured enough. Regaining his humanity will be vital to him conquering the Dark Side."

Dormé didn't completely understand what he meant, so she merely nodded in response. Obi-Wan often went on about things she had no understanding of too; but she could listen to him for hours in that refined, Coruscanti accent. *I miss him*, she thought wistfully, knowing full well that he probably hadn't given her a second thought since she had left. *Damn Jedi vow of celibacy*, she thought. *Seems Anakin Skywalker had no problem breaking that vow, why can't Obi-Wan?*

Nejaa smiled, amused by the furtive thoughts in her mind. Dormé saw the expression on his face and realized that he had read her thoughts, and she went completely red in the face.

“I... I need to see to dinner,” she mumbled and hurried out of the room.

Nejaa watched her go, shaking his head in amusement.

Chapter 25

I would be remiss if I did not thank my dear friend and beta-reader who has helped me tremendously with these chapters. Her medical knowledge and expertise have been truly invaluable, and I thank her.

CHAPTER 25

Obi-Wan Kenobi was discovering just how important money was in the world of smugglers. Not daring to take registered transport, he was crawling across the quadrant via smugglers' vessels which he either snuck onto or coerced his way into. He had already been discovered stowing away once by a Toydarian whose mind was immune to the manipulations that Jedi were so adept at. The creature had booted Kenobi out unceremoniously. Yet, Kenobi was determined to get to Delaya, no matter how long it took. *Padmé needs me... her children need me... I won't let them down.*

Polis Massa

"Eat, Ani," she tells me, handing me a piece of fruit. "You need to replenish your strength."

"Does that mean you are planning on seducing me again, Senator?" I tease her.

She laughs. "You never know," she replies with a smile.

I take the fruit from her and take a bite, realizing as I do so just how truly hungry I am.

"One week," she says thoughtfully. "Do you think that is enough time?"

I shake my head. "I'm afraid not," I reply with a serious expression. "I'm sure it will take at least a lifetime to fully explore all the sensual delights of my new wife."

Padmé giggles as she bites a piece of fruit, and the juice dribbles down her chin.

"See what you made me do?" she says in mock irritation

"How thoughtless of me," I say, setting down the pear I am eating and moving over to her. "Here, let me help you clean that up."

"I'm only kidding, Ani," she says, "it's okay..." she stops as I lick the juice off of her chin.

"Oh, you got some on your neck too," I say, and proceed to slowly run my tongue over her graceful neck. "You really should be more careful."

"Yes, I really should," she replies. I look up at her with a smile, loving the dreamy expression in her eyes.

"I don't think I will ever get enough of you," I tell her softly. "Not in a hundred life times."

"No?" she asks.

I shake my head, my eyes looking at her mouth. “No,” I reply as I lean toward her and kiss her mouth.

She pulls back and looks at me. “Does this mean you’ve built your strength back?” she teases.

I grin at her. “You could say so,” I tell her, kissing her again.

Vader woke up from his dream, the memory of his all too brief honeymoon with Padmé still fresh in his mind. *How could I have allowed our love to be destroyed by that demon, Sidious? How could I have been so blind??*

Vader had lost track of time, and had no idea how long he had been in this state of semi-consciousness as he awaited the surgery that would change his life. Was it hours? Days? Weeks? The doctors had kept him heavily sedated, allowing him to rest and build up his strength in preparation for the big event. He was grateful that they had spared him the horror of wearing the suit and the mask again, for he felt certain that he could not have faced another hour in them.

Padmé had been at his side almost constantly, and although he was initially uneasy with her seeing him in his current state, he was now happy to have her by his side. She knew that he was not able to carry on a conversation, and so she spoke to him at length about their children, telling them about their infancy, their birthdays, the first time they had taken a step on their own. Hearing her speak of the first five years of the twins’ lives was difficult for him, for it made him realize all that he had lost, all that he had missed because of his misguided loyalty to fiend that he had once called master. *But they are in your life now, they love you, they accept you... you will never lose them again.*

Padmé had found the waiting excruciating. She knew the need for it, knew that each hour that passed made Anakin’s chances of surviving greater, but it was tremendously difficult nonetheless. She had checked on the progress of the cellular coding daily, several times a day in fact, and was amazed at the speed with which things were developing. The technicians were astounded as well; neither of them had ever known cells to respond so quickly. *He’s the Chosen One*, Padmé reflected. *That is why... that is why he was able to survive the hell he went through... that is why he will pull through this.*

“Things are going very well,” Doctor Rool told Padmé as they shared a meal together late one evening. “Even better than I had anticipated. At this rate, we should be ready within the next 24 hours.”

“Twenty four hours?” Padmé asked in amazement. “But we’ve only been here two days! How is that possible?”

“Well the DNA coding process was started forty-eight hours ago, right after your husband gave us the word to go ahead. Now that the codes have been activated, the cells can be implanted in the areas of his body in need of repair,” Rool explained. ‘First off we need to remove all the prosthetic devices from his body, both external and internal,’ she explains. “And then we implant the activated cells in their appropriate areas of his body and the regeneration process begins. The new cells repair the damaged ones by regenerating new tissue.”

“That is incredible,” Padmé said, shaking her head in wonder. “And how long will this operation take? It sounds very involved.”

“We have a team of surgical droids who will implant the cells, under our supervision of course,” Rool explained. “With several of them working at once, the procedure should take anywhere from eight to twelve hours.”

“I see,” Padmé said. *The longest eight to twelve hours of my life I’m sure.* “And how long will these... coded cells take to regenerate his damaged organs?”

“After the surgery, we will place him into a medically induced coma for 48 hours so that his body can adjust to the major changes without the stress of him using his systems,” Rool explained. “And during those 48 hours, he will be weaned off life support, and, hopefully, his new organs will function independently. Theoretically they will.”

“Theoretically,” Padmé repeated, alarmed. “You are hopefully more confident than you sound, Doctor.”

Rool smiled. “Relax, Padmé,” she said. “Your husband is a remarkable man, you said so yourself. He will get through this, don’t worry.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, easy for you to say,” she muttered.

Rool stood up and picked up her dinner tray. “You should try to get some rest,” she said. “You haven’t left his side for more than an hour since you arrived. We have a long way to go yet, and he will need you right there with him to get through it.”

“Yes, I know,” Padmé replied, standing up as well. “I will try to rest, it’s just not easy knowing that Anakin’s life is hanging in the balance.”

“Not hanging in the balance, Padmé,” Rool said, putting a hand on Padmé’s shoulder. “He’s getting ready to be remade. Think of it that way; he is going to be reborn.”

Padmé smiled. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said. “That does make it easier.”

Chapter 26

CHAPTER 26

Padmé woke up early, a sense of excitement and trepidation filling her. *Today is the day... the day that will change Ani's life forever.*

She got up and had a quick shower. The surgery was scheduled for 0700, and even though she would merely be a bystander, she felt that she needed to be nearby for Anakin.

Padmé arrived at her husband's hospital room to find the medical droids preparing their instruments. She felt her anxiety level shoot up a notch, and walked over to the bed, doing her best to master her fear. Vader was awake when she reached him, and turned to look at her.

"Hi," she said simply, giving him a smile.

"Hi," he replied. "This is it then, isn't it?"

She nodded. "You'll do great," she said, putting hand on his shoulder. "Dr. Rool feels confident that this surgery will be a huge success."

"I hope she's right," he replied. He was silent for a moment. "Padmé, if something happens to me, Nejaa will..."

"Don't you even say it," she interjected. 'You'll pull through this with flying colours, Ani,' she told him, stroking his bare shoulder gently. "Do you think I'd let you go through this if there was a chance I'd lose you?" she asked her emotions rising dangerously close to the surface.

Vader shook his head. "No, not a chance," she replied with a smile.

"Time to begin," Doctor Rool announced as she entered the room. She wore surgical garb, and was followed into the room by her associate, Doctor Durrón.

"I love you," Padmé said, bending down close to him. "And I'll be right at your side through this, every minute," she told him.

Vader nodded. "I love you too, Padmé," he replied. "I'll see you soon."

Padmé nodded, too emotional to speak, and merely bent to him and kissed his brow.

"All set?" Doctor Durrón asked as he and Rool stood by Vader's side.

He nodded. "Yes, let's get this over with."

Cato Neimoidia

Obi-Wan watched the passers-by at the crowded space station. *Of all the worlds to end up on, it had to be this one...* Kenobi couldn't help but recall the last time he was here, when he and Anakin had attempted to capture the notorious viceroy, Nute Gunray. *And then there was that rather embarrassing incident with the gas...* Kenobi couldn't help but smile to himself as he recalled those days. *How did it all go so astray? Did I not instruct him well enough? Was it*

my fault that he chose the Dark Path? The thought of his former friend and pupil made him melancholy, and harkened to mind that dreadful day on Mustafar five years earlier, when he had witnessed the man he loved like a brother transform into a monster before his very eyes.

..

Don't lecture me, Obi-Wan. I see through the lies of the Jedi. I do not fear the dark side as you do. I have brought peace, justice, freedom, and security to my new Empire.

Your new Empire?

Don't make me kill you.

Anakin, my allegiance is to the Republic... to democracy.

If you're not with me, you're my enemy.

Only a Sith Lord deals in absolutes. I will do what I must...

"Hey, you listening or what?"

Kenobi shook himself from his reverie to look at the surly looking character standing before him. "I beg your pardon," he said. "Were you speaking to me?"

"Yeah, I said there's a law against loitering, so if you have no business here then move along," the man retorted curtly.

"Well is just so happens that I do have business here," Kenobi replied smoothly. 'I 'm looking for a pilot to take me to the Core,' he said. "The Alderaan System to be exact."

The man looked Obi-Wan up and down. "Pretty far," he said. "You got money?"

Obi-Wan lifted an eyebrow. "Are you a pilot?" he asked pointedly.

"No, but..."

"Then it's none of your concern if I have money," Kenobi replied. "Move along and let me be," he said, waving a hand in front of the man.

The man blinked, and then moved along, leaving Kenobi to ponder his next move.

Polis Massa

Never had time moved as slowly as it did while Padmé waited. Each hour that passed seemed twice its normal duration as the surgery dragged on and on. She stood outside the operating room, which was very much like the one where she had given birth to Luke and Leia, and watched as the team of droids and doctors worked diligently to repair the broken body of her beloved Anakin.

She knew what it was that they were doing, or at least had a layman's understanding of it; she knew that they were experts in this procedure, and yet the fear she felt would not abate. Doctor Rool herself had admitted that they had never performed such a radical procedure on a human before; what if it doesn't work? What if the shock to his system is too great? *What if he dies??* She pushed such thoughts from her mind, refusing to let them undermine her efforts to remain strong.

Finally, after nearly eleven hours, the surgical team seemed to be wrapping things up. She saw Doctor Rool look at her through the window at her and nodded her head. *He's made it, Padmé thought, the relief almost buckling her knees. He's alive... he's going to be alright!*

She watched the team through a blur of tears as they prepared the medi-chamber. Doctor Rool had told her that Anakin would need to spend forty-eight hours in a medically induced coma within its protective environment. The chamber was equipped with a life support system of its own which also provided the environment for cellular replication designed especially for this procedure. During this time, only the medical droids would be permitted within the chamber to monitor his vitals and check on the progress of the regeneration.

The thought of not seeing him for forty-eight hours was difficult for Padmé, but she was determined that she would get through it. *I can do it* she told herself. *Only forty-eight hours until I get my Ani back.* The thought of returning to Delaya to fetch the twins had occurred to her; but if something went wrong, Heaven forbid it; she would not want to put them through that trauma. No, she would need to get through the next forty-eight hours alone. *I can do it... for Anakin I can do this.*

"Doctor Rool, Doctor Durran," Padmé said as the two physicians emerged from the operating room. "How is he? How did it go?"

"Very well," Durran commented. "I anticipate the regeneration will go equally well, wouldn't you say, Doctor?"

Rool nodded. "Yes, I would," she said. "Your husband is a remarkable man, Padmé."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, he certainly is," she replied.

"Why don't you try to get some rest?" suggested Rool. "This has been a grueling few days for you; I'm sure you're exhausted."

Padme nodded. "I am," she admitted. "Thank you, Thank you both, for everything. I am so grateful that you've been able to help him," she said, growing emotional again.

Rool smiled and put her arms around Padmé. "You're very welcome," she said. "Now come, let's get you something to eat."

Padmé didn't argue with the physician, and let her lead her away from the surgical ward.

Chapter 27

CHAPTER 27

Planet Delaya

“Why aren’t Mommy and Daddy home yet?” Leia demanded as Dormé tried to get her to settle down for bed. “You said they’d only be gone for a day or two! It’s been 5 days, I’ve been counting,” she declared, pushing her lower lip out petulantly.

Dormé sat on the edge of Leia’s bed. “Well Leia, you see, the doctors decided to go ahead with your father’s surgery, so they will be longer than they thought they’d be.”

“Why does Daddy need surgery?” Luke asked.

“Well, he has some really serious health problems,” Dormé tried to explain. “He had an accident, and he...”

“He was in a fire,” Luke told her. “He almost died.”

“Yes, yes that’s true Luke,” she told him. “But...”

“Obi-Wan saw it happen,” Leia stated. “He was fighting with our daddy; he is the reason why he was hurt.”

Dormé frowned. *Is this the nonsense you’re filling their heads with, Vader?* She thought angrily. *Turning their innocent minds against the one who has watched over them all these years when you were off terrorizing the galaxy??*

“Where did you hear that?” Dormé asked. “Your uncle Obi-Wan treated your father like a brother,” she said, and *your father turned against him. It wasn’t Obi-Wan’s fault that he chose to become what he did.*

“What do you mean?” Luke asked, studying Dormé’s face intently.

Dormé looked at the boy in astonishment, startled by the eerie way he had of reading her thoughts. *Like father like son*, she thought. “Nothing,” she said, standing up. “Time to go to sleep, both of you.”

Luke watched her leave, and then turned to his sister. *What do you think she meant?*

I don’t know, Leia replied. *She doesn’t like Daddy, but I don’t understand why. Maybe we should ask her sometime.*

She wouldn’t tell us, Luke replied sleepily. *I miss him, I miss Mommy.*

Me too... and then they both fell asleep, thinking of their mother and father on the other side of the galaxy.

Polis Massa

Padmé had stayed close to the surgical ward, anxiously awaiting each report from the droid medical team. Anakin had been in a coma for close to twenty-four hours, and so far the reports had been very promising.

“The organs are regenerating at an incredible rate,” Doctor Rool reported to Padmé as they sat together in the waiting lounge. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Padmé said, smiling with relief. “So you anticipate he’ll be ready to come off the life support in another twenty-four hours?”

“Well, not all at once,” Rool replied. “At least I don’t expect so. Although with the progress that he’s showing thus far, anything is possible. You mentioned a few days ago that he was a unique individual; what did you mean by that, Padmé?”

“It’s rather hard to explain,” Padmé said. “He is what the Jedi called the Chosen One, the one from prophecy who was destined to bring balance to the Force. He didn’t have a father, Doctor; his mother simply became pregnant with him. The Jedi used to say that he was conceived in the Force itself. I don’t begin to understand how that is possible, but judging by the remarkable abilities he’s always had, it only makes sense that he is from a remarkable beginning.”

Rool listened with interest. “But he turned against the Jedi, didn’t he?” she asked. “He’s spent the past five years hunting down the Jedi from what I’ve heard.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, he has,” she admitted. “He’s changed though, Doctor, since the children and I came back into his life. He has spent the past five years thinking we were dead, just as I thought he was dead. Now he is committed to protecting us all from the emperor, and I have complete faith in him.”

“Well I suppose we all deserve a second chance,” Rool replied. “I just hope that he uses it to make amends for what he has done.”

“He will,” Padmé said, hoping that she was right. “I know it. You’ve enabled him to take a huge step towards regaining his humanity, Doctor. That will make all the difference, I’m sure of it.”

Rool nodded. “I’m glad I was able to help,” she said.

Chapter 28

CHAPTER 28

Padmé stood at the viewing window, waiting. It seemed to her that she had done more waiting in the past week than she had in the previous thirty years of her life. The forty-eight hours had passed, and today Anakin would be removed from the medi-chamber he had spent the past two days in. *Would he be whole?* She wondered anxiously as the team of medical droids gathered in the room before her. They had reported that the regeneration was going well, extremely well; *so that means everything went according to plan*, she told herself. *Right?*

Doctor Rool entered the intensive care room at this point, and nodded at Padmé with a smile through the window. Padmé gave her a wave back, her anxiety level rising as she realized the moment of truth was upon them. With bated breath she watched as the droids entered the medi-chamber, while the technicians and doctors outside stood by. *This is taking too long... something has gone wrong...* she fretted as she waited for the droids to re-emerge with their patient. Finally she saw something happen.

The medi-chamber opened and two droids emerged, followed by the gurney on which Anakin lie. Padmé held her breath as she saw him, but was unable to ascertain his condition due to the presence of the droids surrounding the gurney. She watched as the droids moved the gurney away from the chamber, allowing the doctors room to examine their patient. *Get out of the way!* Padmé wanted to scream, having to hold herself back from pounding on the glass window before her. *Let me see my Anakin!*

Finally Doctor Rool looked up at Padmé, and motioned for her to come inside. Padmé did so at once, running to the door in her haste to see him. She approached the gurney, almost afraid to hope, and when the doctors stepped aside to allow her to see him, she stopped in her tracks.

With the exception of a monitoring device and an intravenous, he was functioning independently. But what she noticed first and foremost was that his body was whole again. Gone were the prosthetics, the artificial means by which he was forced to exist for five years. Gone were the scars and the burns; he was as she remembered him. He was Anakin once again.

Padmé felt herself trembling with emotion as she approached him, almost too afraid to touch him lest she discover this was all some wonderful illusion. Reaching out a hand, she touched his arm, and slowly ran it down the length of his forearm to his hand. Padmé had always loved Anakin's hands; so strong and powerful, but capable of such tenderness. She curled her small hand around his large one, overwhelmed with the feelings the warmth of his skin next to hers evoked within her.

Dr. Rool watched Padmé's reaction with a smile.

“His recovery is truly miraculous, Padmé,” she’s said “And I have a hunch about why that is, and perhaps you can tell me if it’s a sound one.”

Padmé looked up at her.

“The droids reported an unusual component in his blood that none of us can explain,” the physician continued. “We were hoping you would know something about it.”

“Medi-chlorians,” Padme said, looking back down at Anakin’s face. “That’s what you detected.”

Dr. Dorran and Dr. Rool exchanged a look.

“I’ve heard theories about their existence,” Dr. Dorran commented. “But I’ve always had my doubts. You mean to say they actually exist?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she said, not taking her eyes from Anakin’s face. “They’re real. They are what enable a Jedi to manipulate the energy of the Force. Anakin’s count is higher than anyone in history. The Jedi used to call him the Chosen One.”

Rool nodded. “Extraordinary,” she commented. “So I suppose these midi-chlorians are the reason he has such remarkable recuperative abilities.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me at all,” Padmé replied with a smile. “All of Anakin’s abilities are remarkable; why should his ability to heal be any different?”

Doctor Dorran smiled. “That certainly is an interesting theory,” he remarked. “And perhaps you are right. At any rate, we are both pleased with the results of the procedure.”

“How soon can he go home?” Padmé asked, unable to hold back from asking any longer.

“We need to monitor his heart and lung function for the next few hours,” Doctor Rool explained. “But barring anything unforeseen, a week, perhaps less.”

“A week?” she asked, disappointed. “But… he’s functioning on his own now, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is,” Doctor Dorran replied. “But we want to keep an eye on him for a few days. As you know we have never done this surgery before, and we really don’t know what to expect as far as recovery time goes.”

Padmé considered this, and realized that they were just being cautious. Still, she wanted desperately to take him home, to have the twins see him whole and healthy once again. Perhaps a compromise was possible, she thought, but put the idea aside for now.

“Shall we revive him now, doctor?” one of the medi-droids asked.

“Yes, please do,” Dr. Rool replied. “I’m sure Mrs. Skywalker is more than ready.”

Padmé watched, her grip on Anakin’s hand tightening as the medi-droid worked to revive Anakin.

“Will he be in any pain?” Padmé asked, watching Anakin’s face anxiously.

“No, not at all,” Doctor Rool assured her. “It will be like he’s waking up from a deep sleep.”

Padme nodded. "I see," she said. "Is it alright if I wait here for him to wake up?"

"Of course," Dr. Rool replied. "I imagine your face is the one he'd most want to see when he does."

Padmé smiled. "I can't argue with that," she said. "Thank you again, both of you, for everything."

The physicians left her at this point, and after the medi-droids had finished putting their equipment away, they departed also, leaving Padmé alone with Anakin.

"Ani, can you hear me?" she said, caressing his face gently.

Anakin started to stir, almost imperceptibly, but Padmé noticed nonetheless, and it encouraged her.

"Ani, try to open your eyes," she urged him. "Wake up now."

Slowly, ever so slowly, Anakin opened his eyes. He was still very groggy, very disoriented, but he made an attempt to determine his surroundings nonetheless. He looked around, having had no memories of what had transpired over the past forty-eight hours. And then he saw his wife. She smiled at him, and then he remembered: *the surgery*.

"Padmé," he said, his voice sounding utterly different to his own ears. "What... how..." He didn't even know what to say, how to formulate the question that was burning in his mind.

"You're healed, Ani," she said, bringing the hand she held in hers up to show him. 'The surgery was a complete success,' she added, smiling at him, the joy she felt reflected in her eyes. "You'll never have to wear that suit or that mask again," she told him.

Anakin looked at the hand she showed him, and lifted the other one to examine it. *Is this a dream?* He wondered in astonishment. *Is this truly possible??* Tentatively he brought his hands to his face, expecting to find the horror left there by Mustafar. When he found smooth undamaged skin, he looked up at Padmé in astonishment. "I... I can't believe it," he said. "It worked... I'm... human again, fully human again."

Padmé nodded as tears sprung to her eyes. "Yes, you are," she replied, caressing his face gently.

Anakin smiled, reaching up and taking her hand. "Do you realize what this means, Padmé?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. 'A whole new chance,' she said. "A new life."

He nodded. "Yes," he replied. 'I will destroy the emperor, and then our family will be safe,' he told her. "There will be no more need for hiding."

Padmé felt herself grow tense at his words. She had forgotten that despite what he looked like there was still a great deal of Darth Vader in him.

"Ani, please don't worry yourself about that now," she said, trying to hide the anxiety from her voice. "Right now all you should be concerned with is resting and getting your strength back."

Vader nodded, studying his wife's face intently. He could sense that she was upset by his comment, and couldn't understand why. *Surely she wanted revenge for all that Sidious had done to them as much as he did! Surely she must see that the only way they would ever know peace was if Sidious were dead.*

"Very well, angel," he said at last, feeling the fatigue overtaking him again. "I want to go home," he told her as he closed his eyes.

Padmé kissed his cheek. "Sleep now," she told him. *Sleep and forget the name of Palpatine, Ani; sleep and let go of your anger, or you will never truly return to me.*

Chapter 29

CHAPTER 29

Obi-Wan Kenobi fought hard to master the frustration he felt welling up within him. His progress, which had until now been slow but steady, had been seriously hampered by the presence of a legion of clone troopers in the vicinity. He had not yet managed to leave Humbarine when their arrival forced him to hide and hide quickly. He knew that his face was well known by the Empire, who saw him as a dangerous enemy. He knew what would happen should the clones find him.

Memories of that horrifying day, of Order 66 still haunted him; the deaths of hundreds of Jedi across the galaxy still ate away at his soul. *How many Jedi did you kill that day, Vader? How much innocent blood is on your hands?*

The thought of his former friend and pupil only served to worsen his mood, for it reminded him of the urgency of his situation. *I must get to Delaya, he thought anxiously. Padmé and the twins need me and my protection. If Palpatine finds them, I will never forgive myself.* But despite this, Obi-Wan was forced to stay put for now, at least until the clones had vacated the area. And so he waited, trying to remain calm and not consider what might happen should he be delayed for too much longer.

Polis Massa

"Alright now, time to get you up and walking."

Vader was more than ready to do so. Convalescence in bed was making him climb the walls.

Padmé stood by and watched as two droids assisted him to his feet. He stood for a moment, unaccustomed to the sensation of having human feet once again. He had become so used to being in discomfort and even pain due to the prosthetic limbs he had been fitted with. *No, not fitted with; the artificial limbs that had been drilled into my bones without as much as a sedative to dull the excruciating pain...*

"Well?" How does it feel?"

Vader looked down at his wife standing before him. He smiled. "It feels amazing."

Padmé smiled, and took one of his hands. "Ready for a short walk?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Absolutely," he replied. "I'll go mad if I have to remain in that bed much longer."

"Now don't over do it," one of the medical droids cautioned him. "You're bound to feel some stiffness, so don't push yourself."

"Did you hear that?" Padmé asked as she and Vader walked slowly across the room. "Don't push yourself."

“Three words that I’ve heard more times than I care to remember,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé laughed, linking her arm through his, overjoyed to feel the warmth of his flesh next to hers again. “Yes, I’m sure you have,” she said. “But this time, try to actually do it.”

Vader looked down at her with a smile. “I will try,” he told her. “Somehow I get the feeling you will make certain of it, though.”

Padmé nodded. “You’re quite right,” she replied. “I intend to see to it that you make a complete recovery, no matter what it takes.”

Vader simply smiled at her, loving her protectiveness. “How long before we can go home?” he asked. “I miss Luke and Leia.”

“So do I,” she replied. “The doctors said about a week.”

“A week!?” he exclaimed. ‘No, that’s not necessary,’ he said. “I feel fine, Padmé. Truly. I’m eating now, I’m walking,” he said. “I feel great.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m sure you do,” she said. “But they are just being cautious, Ani. You can’t blame them for that; your surgery was rather serious.”

“I know that,” he replied. “But it worked, Padmé, you just said so yourself. I’m fine.”

“Well, maybe we can make a compromise with them,” Padmé suggested.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe they’d let you go home, so long as you came back for a check up in a few days,” she replied.

“That would mean a great deal to me if you could talk them into that,” Vader replied. “Perhaps it’s time to put your diplomatic skills to the test,” he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, I think it will take some negotiations to get them to release you as soon as you’d like,” she told him. ‘But I will do my best. Now, however, you need to get off your feet,’ she told him, directing him back towards the bed. “Remember, don’t overdo it.”

“Very well,” he sighed, impatient with being treated like an invalid. “I will rest. But I won’t stay here a week, Padmé, even if I need to break out of here.”

Padmé looked up at him, trying to decide if he was being facetious. *No, I think he’s serious. He’s as anxious to go home as I am.*

“I’ll see what I can do,” she assured him as he sat down on the edge of the bed. “You rest now, Anakin. I will go talk to them right now.”

“I don’t know, Padmé,” Doctor Rool said, shaking her head. “I don’t like the idea of him leaving so soon. Delaya is awfully far away.”

“Yes, it is,” Padmé agreed. “What if I brought him back say in a week’s time? He misses the children so much, as do I. I promise not to let him over do it while he’s home.”

Doctor Rool and Doctor Durran looked at one another.

"I disapprove of this," Durran said. "The procedure is just too new; we have no idea what could happen, what could go wrong. And if something does, it's not like you can simply contact the medical facility in Delaya City; they know nothing about this procedure."

"Why do you think something will go wrong?" Padmé asked, becoming exasperated. "You said yourselves that the surgery was a complete success, and that he is in fantastic health. It's not like he's not going to return — I promise, I'll have him back here in a week."

Durran sighed. "I know how anxious you are to take your husband home, Mrs. Skywalker," he said. "But it is in his best interest to remain here for the next week. We have to ascertain that there is no chance of complications," he explained.

"What complications?" Padmé asked anxiously.

"Difficulty breathing," Durran began, 'pain or swelling, particularly in the upper and lower extremities, cardiac complications such as chest pains; cyanosis or lack of oxygen to his heart , rapid and or irregular heart rate, dizziness, weakness of any sort, loss of appetite... you see, there are any number of things that could happen,' he explained. "And we are really in no position to predict what if anything will."

Padmé nodded glumly, feeling frustrated and utterly overwhelmed. *Ani will be so disappointed...*

"We know you want what is best for him," Rool said, trying to soften the blow. "But we strongly feel that what is best for him is to remain here where he can have the specialized care that his unique situation requires."

"I see," Padmé replied quietly.

"It's really for the best, Mrs. Skywalker," Doctor Durran said. "Surely you can see that."

"Yes, I suppose I can," Padmé responded, standing up. "Thank you. I'll go speak to him now."

Padmé left the room, holding back her tears until she reached the corridor. Leaning back against the wall, she closed her eyes as the disappointment and frustration overwhelmed her. She had barely slept in days; the stress of worrying and waiting had been more than she could have ever anticipated. *And now this.*

It frightened her to think of all that could happen, all that could still go wrong, and she reproached herself for thinking that they were out of the woods already. *We have a long way to go yet, she told herself. Don't forget that — but we'll get there, I must focus on that.*

Brushing the tears away impatiently, she straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath, determined to be strong. *Ani needs me to be strong, and I'm not going to let him down.* She started off down the corridor, bracing herself for her husband's disappointment.

Chapter 30

CHAPTER 30

Vader was sitting up in bed just finishing a light meal when Padmé returned to his room. He turned to watch her enter the room when he sensed her presence close by. He could tell by the look in her eyes that things had not gone well. *This will be more difficult than I thought...* he reflected.

"They said no, didn't they?" he said, holding out a hand to her.

Padmé nodded. "I'm afraid so," she said, taking his outstretched hand. "I'm sure they feel it is best for you. Should something happen, you..."

"Nothing will happen!" Vader exclaimed in frustration. "I'm fine!" He sighed, his brow creasing into a frown. "Foolish doctors," he grumbled.

Padmé could not help but smile at his impatience. "I know it's disappointing," she said, stroking his face gently. "I'm disappointed too. But isn't it better to wait and ensure that everything is okay rather than take a chance that it isn't?"

Vader turned his eyes to hers. "Yes, I suppose so," he said, taking the hand he held in his and bringing it to his lips. He kissed it softly, his eyes never leaving hers. "I suppose I'm just anxious to be alone with my wife," he explained.

Padmé smiled, the look in his eyes and the physical contact sending shivers down to her toes. "I'm rather anxious for that myself," she told him softly. "More than you can imagine."

Vader nodded. "You know, not a day has gone by in the past five years that I haven't longed for you," he told her. "But I never dreamed that I would ever be able to touch you again."

"No, neither did I," she said. "I can still hardly believe that you're really alive, and now this."

Vader smiled. "I know exactly what you mean," he said.

Padmé pushed the food tray away from the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She took his face in her hands. "All those years I thought you were dead, a part of me was dead too," she told him. "I can't think of Obi-Wan now without getting angry all over again."

The name of Obi-Wan sent a flash of anger through Vader. Padmé could see it in his eyes, and it frightened her that so much anger still lurked within him. Yet, could she blame him for being angry at Kenobi? After what he had done to him on Mustafar? *No, he has every right to be angry—we both do.*

"I'm sorry," she said, stroking his face. "I shouldn't have mentioned his name. You need to stay calm, Anakin, remember? No stress."

"I will try," he said. "But staying here it won't be easy."

Padmé frowned. *I didn't think of that...* “Well, it won't be for much longer,” she assured him. “And then we can go home. Just think of how excited the twins will be to see you,” she added with a smile.

Vader nodded. Thinking of his children, however, only increased his desire to leave, only added to his frustration of not being permitted to do so.

“I know you're frustrated,” she told him. “But it's important that you try to relax, Ani. You will only hinder your recovery if you allow yourself to get upset.”

“I know,” he replied. “But I'm not terribly good at controlling my emotions, Padmé; you of all people should know that.”

She smiled. “Yes, I know that,” she replied. “Did you enjoy your meal?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“Yes,” he replied. “Eating real food again is a distinct pleasure. I hadn't realized how much I missed it.”

“I'm sure there are many things you will rediscover now,” she told him.

“I can think of several,” he replied with a smile.

“Is that so?” she asked. “Care to enlighten me?”

“I'd rather show you,” he replied, pulling her to him and kissing her deeply. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, forgetting for the moment where they were. The passion of his kiss was just as she remembered; it was a demanding kiss, one filled with the longing and need that had built up over five long years of despair and loneliness. It awakened within her the same feelings, feelings that she had sublimated years ago, that she never imagined she could feel again. And yet now they coursed through her veins rampantly.

“Oh my,” she said when he finally broke their kiss. “That was...wonderful.”

Vader smiled. “Did that enlighten you?” he asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied.

He leaned back against the pillow, smiling at her, enjoying the flush in her cheeks. “A week?” he said. “Is that what they said?”

“I'm afraid so,” she replied.

He shook his head. “I won't stay here another week, Padmé,” he told her. “They can't make me stay.”

Padmé raised her eyebrows. “And what do you plan to do, Ani; escape? Or maybe use one of your Jedi mind tricks to convince them?” she teased.

He smiled. “No, of course not,” he replied. “I won't have to.”

Padmé frowned and shook her head. “You are incorrigible, Ani,” she scolded him. “What am I going to do with you?”

His smile broadened at her question. “Would you really like me to answer that?” he asked.

Padmé almost said yes, but changed her mind. Knowing him, he'd tell her exactly what he wanted her to do, and in no uncertain terms. *He always was so bold that way*, she reflected.

"I'm not sure," she said, "I suppose that depends on the nature of your answer."

Vader laughed, something he had done so seldom in the past five years that it startled him in its spontaneity. "I think you can guess what that would be, Padmé," he told her.

"Yes, I'm sure I can," she replied, thrilled to see his playful side emerging.

"Well, it looks like you're doing quite well, Lord Vader," Doctor Durran said as he entered the room.

Padmé hated hearing the Sith name that she had so adamantly refused to utter. She turned to the doctor as he approached the bed.

"Yes I am," Vader replied. "So why can't I go home?" he asked pointedly.

Durran looked at Padmé who merely shrugged.

"Surely you realize the seriousness of the surgery you underwent a mere twenty-four hours ago," Durran stated.

"Of course I do," Vader replied.

"Then you must understand how vital it is that your condition be closely monitored over the next few days," the physician continued.

Vader considered Durran's words. "Yes, I understand that," he replied at last. "What I don't understand is why that monitoring needs to take place here."

Durran frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he admitted. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that I am capable of monitoring my own health," Vader replied. "I've done so over the past five years, when my health was in shambles. If I could do so then, I can do so now."

"You're not a physician, Lord Vader," Durran retorted. "What exactly would you do should an emergency arise? You may have extraordinary abilities, but you are not invincible."

"I didn't mean to imply that I was," Vader returned. "Surely a droid could be spared to assist me," he suggested. "One capable of monitoring my health as well as attending to any issues that may arise."

Durran thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "No, I still don't like it," he said. "A droid is only capable of so much. It's simply too soon. I'm sorry; you'll just have to accept your situation, Lord Vader. There's nothing to be done to change it."

Vader frowned as he stared at the physician, but made no reply. Padmé looked from one man to the other, sensing the tension that had suddenly arisen between them.

"Perhaps it's best if we let Anakin rest," she suggested at last, anxious to diffuse the situation. "You need to build up your strength, Ani," she reminded him.

Vader looked as his wife, his expression softening. As much as he hated to admit it, he was fatigued, and the thought of a nap was rather appealing.

“Good idea,” Durran said at last. ‘Rest and plenty of it,’ he said as he walked away. “That’s the best way to rebuild your energy.”

Vader watched him leave and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. “Idiot,” he muttered.

“Now Ani, that idiot gave you your life back,” she chided him. “Don’t forget that.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. “I know,” he replied. “It’s just so frustrating.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied, pulling the blanket up over him. ‘Now rest,’ she said, kissing him on the brow. “I will be back later. Promise me you’ll try to sleep?”

He nodded.

“Good,” she said, standing up. “I’ll see you later,” she said.

He merely nodded again, too mired in his own mood to reply.

Padmé frowned, seeing how irritated he was. She hoped that his frustration would not hinder his recovery; stress was the last thing he needed right now. *Let it go, Anakin*, she thought as she left him. *For your own sake, just let it go, just this once.*

Chapter 31

CHAPTER 31

*Terror, sheer terror... it was in their eyes, in their auras, rolling off their bodies in great searing waves... **No don't... I'm sorry... don't!!***

Vader woke up with a start, his torso bathed in sweat. He could feel his heart pounding within him, and even he knew that was not good. Within seconds the alarm within the heart monitor he was still attached to started to sound. At once the door burst open and two medical droids and Doctor Rool rushed in.

Here we go, Vader thought impatiently as he braced himself for their examinations.

"How are you feeling?" Dr. Rool asked anxiously as she applied a stethoscope to his chest, the metal cold against his bare skin.

"Blood pressure is 200 over 100," one of the droids reported. "Heart rate is 100."

"I had a bad dream," Vader explained amidst the commotion.

Rool nodded, continuing to listen to his heart. "Your heart is racing," she told him, looking up at him, a troubled look in her eyes.

Padmé burst into the room at this point, her long hair disheveled, her dressing gown thrown hastily over her nightie. "What's happening?" she asked, pushing her hair over her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"I had a bad dream," Vader explained.

Padmé looked at Dr. Rool. "Doctor?" she asked.

"One moment please," she said as she continued to monitor his heart.

"Blood pressure is 110 over 80," the droid reported.

"Heart rate is returning to normal." Rool reported. She removed her stethoscope. "You gave us quite a scare," she told Vader. "That must have been some dream."

"It was," he replied, not wanting to scare Padmé. "I need to see my children."

Rool nodded. "Is that what the dream was about?" she asked.

Vader simply nodded.

"Obviously they are on your mind a great deal," Rool continued. "What if we arranged to bring them here?"

"That's a great idea," Padmé said. "What do you think, Ani?"

Vader shook his head. "The distance is too great," he replied. "No, their safety could be compromised traveling all that way. Their ship could be intercepted, the Empire could find

them... no, out of the question.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to wait to see them,” Rool said.

Vader looked at her, the brooding expression not leaving his face. “So it seems,” he said simply.

Padmé walked to his side and took his hand. “Would it be alright for me to stay with him for while?” she asked the physician. “Just to help him calm down?”

Rool nodded. “Yes, I think that’s a very good idea,” she said. “He must remain calm if he is to give his body the rest it needs.”

Padmé looked at Vader, knowing that for him that was much easier said than done. “Thank you doctor,” she said. “We’ll do our best, won’t we Anakin?”

Vader looked at his wife and simply nodded.

“Very well,” Rool said, walking away from the bedside. ‘Try to get some sleep,’ she told Vader. “The longer it takes you to regain your strength, the longer your stay here will be I’m afraid,” she told him.

“I understand,” he replied, not taking his eyes away from Padmé.

Rool and one of the droids left at this point, leaving one remaining to continue to ensure that his heart rate and pressure resumed a normal level.

“Don’t they get it?” Vader said as Padmé sat on the edge of the bed. “So long as I am forced to remain here it will be next to impossible for me to remain calm,”

Padmé was beginning to think the same thing. But what could they do? It was a no win situation.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” she said, feeling helpless. “I wish I could think of a solution.”

Vader took her hand, feeling badly that he was venting his frustration on her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to make you uneasy, Padmé. I’m just anxious to get out of here.”

“I know you are,” she said. “I’m just as anxious as you are. But you heard what she said; the longer you remain in this state of frustration, the longer it will take for your body to recover. So please Ani, try to keep calm.”

He nodded. “I will try,” he said, running a hand over the long tresses that hung over one shoulder. ‘Having you here with me helps,’ he told her with a smile. “Your presence has always had a soothing affect on me.”

She smiled. “Good” she replied. “Then I will remain here with you,” she added, bringing her legs up onto the bed and snuggling up to him.

Vader was surprised yet pleased by her move, and pulled her close, loving the sensation of having her in his arms again. He looked over at the droid who was busy checking the readout on the monitor.

“Get out,” Vader said simply.

The droid looked up at him, registering as much surprise as an artificial life form can register. It did as it was told, however, and left the room.

Vader pulled the blanket up over the two of them, bringing one arm around her. He kissed her shoulder, loving the scent and feel of her silken hair against his face.

“What was your dream about?” Padmé asked.

Vader hesitated before replying and so she turned to face him. “Ani?”

“It’s difficult to describe,” he said. ‘The twins were afraid, terrified,’ he told her. “I don’t know what it was they were afraid of though,” he added with a frown. “I need to see them, Padmé,” he told her. “I have to get to them.”

Padmé sighed. “What can we do?” she asked him. “They are adamant that you remain here. I don’t know how to change their minds.”

“No, neither do I,” Vader replied, rubbing the tips of her hair between his finger and thumb. ‘Do you know how incredible it is to be close to you like this again?’ To be able to smell the scent of your hair, to feel its softness?”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, I know exactly what you mean,” she replied, running her hands down the sides of his face.

Vader closed his eyes, even the smallest touch from her electrifying his senses.

“I want to make love to you, Padmé,” he told her, opening his eyes and looking at her. “But I’m sure that would set off that damnable heart monitor again, and I don’t exactly wish an audience.”

Padmé smiled. “No, neither do I,” she said, looking into his eyes. “Besides, I think that might qualify as... overdoing it,” she added with a smile.

Vader raised his eyebrows. “Oh? You think so?”

Padmé nodded. “Oh yes, I know so,” she replied. *Okay... stop this right now before you push him too far...* “We’ll have plenty of time for that when we get home, Ani,” she told him.

“Yes, when we get home,” he replied. “Whenever that is,” he added pessimistically

She smiled. “Just think of that as motivation for keeping calm,” she suggested.

Vader smiled. “Calm? Hardly a work I’d use to describe the state you have me in right now, Padmé,” he told her.

Padmé’s face reddened. “Maybe it’s not such a good idea for me to stay here then,” she said, reproaching herself for her shortsightedness.

“No, don’t leave,” he said. ‘I’ll behave,’ he added with a smile. “I promise.”

“Okay then,” she replied. “But remember; that heart monitor is ultra sensitive,” she teased him.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said pulling her into the crook of his arm. She nestled up close to him and closed her eyes.

“Good night my angel,” he said softly into her ear.

Chapter 32

CHAPTER 32

Padmé woke up before her husband the next morning. She turned and looked at him, watching him sleep. She could still hardly believe that he was healed and whole again. *Even his hair is coming back*, she thought as she noticed the blond stubble sprouting on his head and darker stubble on his face.

Yet despite his appearance, Padmé knew that he still had a long way to go before he truly was Anakin Skywalker again. The darkness that had claimed him five years earlier still surged through him; every so often she was reminded of its lethal presence. *But he will conquer it*, she thought with conviction. *Together we will destroy it and its hold on him forever.*

Padmé got out of bed quietly, not wishing to wake Vader, and, after putting on her robe, left the room.

I bury my face in the pillows, wrapping my arms around them and start to drift off again when she returns to the room. She is wearing her silken dressing gown, and has let down her hair. In her hand she has a bottle of something that smells wonderful.

“Now I want you to relax,” she says as she sits beside me on the bed. “You’re all tied up in knots again, aren’t you?” she asks.

I nod my head.

“Just as I thought,” she says. I feel something warm on my back and soon realize that it is massage oil. It feels amazing, and when she starts to work it into my shoulders, I feel as though I could melt right into the mattress beneath me.

“Ohhhhhh....” I groan. “That feels incredible.”

“I’m glad you like it,” she says, continuing to rub my tired muscles. Next she moves to the base of my neck, and I can feel her small but determined fingers slowly working their way down my spine.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I murmur against the pillow.

“My grandmother was a healer,” she replies, pouring more oil onto the small of my back. “She taught my mother, and my mother taught Sola and I.”

“Remind me to thank your mother the next time I see her,” I say with a smile.

Padmé laughs as her hands continue to work out all the tightness from my back. “I’m sure she would find it rather strange coming from you,” she comments.

“I guess so,” I reply, feeling myself relax under her expert hands. She leaves my back and moves down on the bed, and the next thing I feel is her warm, oiled hands upon my calves. “Mmmmmmm...” is all I manage to say at this point.

She laughs again. "I'm glad you're enjoying this," she says. "Anakin, did anyone ever tell you that you have a lovely bottom?"

It is my turn to laugh. "Only you," I tell her.

"Well you do," she says. "Muscular, taut... just perfect," she says, reaching up and giving me a light slap on the butt.

"Now now," I say. "Behave yourself, Senator."

She laughs. "Are you sure about that, Commander?"

I think about that for a moment. "Well....not entirely," I admit.

Padmé laughs again. "Okay, turn over," she says.

Turn over....oh boy, this is really getting interesting now...

"Lord Vader... Lord Vader."

Vader was yanked from the beautiful visions of his dream by the monotonic voice of the medidroid. He opened eyes and glared up at it. "What?" he growled.

"I've brought you some breakfast," the droid replied, setting down the tray. "Doctor Rool has ordered high calcium, high protein diet for you to strengthen your new bone and muscle tissue."

Vader nodded his understanding as he sat up in his bed. "Where is my wife?" he asked.

"I don't know sir," the droid replied. "Shall I inquire for you?"

"Never mind," Vader muttered, standing up. 'I'd like to take a shower,' he said. "That's something you can inquire about."

"I shall do so at once," the droid replied, pleased to have a task to perform. It scurried out of the room, leaving Vader alone.

"This report is very alarming," Dr. Durran said as he examined the datapad in his hand. "Blood pressure 200 over 100?? That's far too much stress on his heart."

Dr. Rool nodded. "Yes, I know," she replied. "He said he'd had a nightmare."

"Do you believe him?" Durran asked her.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked. "Increased heart rate and blood pressure are common physical reactions to nightmares. The fact that they returned to normal within a short time would indicate that he was telling the truth. Why would you suspect otherwise?"

"Because he wants desperately to leave," Durran replied. "And has unusual abilities that could enable him to..."

"To fake a crisis? Is that what you're implying?"

Both physicians turned to see Padmé standing in the doorway. She looked at each of them in turn, her dark eyes reflecting her indignation.

"Mrs. Skywalker," Durran began. "Your husband's abilities are no secret," he said. "And it's quite obvious that he is more than anxious to leave this facility. Is it so far fetched to think that he would do such a thing?"

"Yes it is," Padmé retorted at once. "Anakin is no liar! He has done many things, made many mistakes in his life, but he has never been a liar. Besides that, he has suffered from nightmares for as long as I've known him, so for him to have one now is not unusual at all, and I resent that you would imply otherwise."

"Well, you certainly know your husband better than we do," Dr. Rool commented, trying to soothe Padmé.

"Yes I do," Padmé replied. "This is why I can tell you that so long as you force him to remain here, the more stress you will place on him."

"What do you suggest, Padmé?" Dr. Rool asked in exasperation.

I don't know!! Padmé wanted to scream. Instead, she merely shook her head. "I wish I knew what to suggest," she replied.

Rool and Durran looked at one another.

"Doctor Rool! Doctor Durran!"

All three turned to see a medidroid scurrying down the corridor towards them.

"What is wrong?" Rool asked.

"We are no longer getting a readout from Lord Vader's heart monitor."

"What?" Durran exclaimed as all three of them started down the hallway.

Vader had almost forgotten how enjoyable a hot shower could be. It was not until he had lost the ability to perform even the most rudimentary things, like taking a shower, that he truly missed them. But now....*this is fantastic*, he thought as he closed his eyes and allowed the water to cascade over his body. He had grown impatient waiting for the droid to return and had simply disconnected himself from the monitoring device and gone ahead with the shower. He figured that if he were in and out quickly enough, the droid would never be the wiser. But now that he was rediscovering the joys of water on his new body, it was rather difficult to keep the shower short. What did motivate him, however, was the hunger rumbling in his stomach.

Remembering the breakfast tray, he turned off the water and stepped out of the shower stall. Standing in front of the mirror as he toweled off, he was startled by the sight of his face after so long. He peered closely at himself, running a hand over his chin with a smile as he realized that he needed a shave.

From outside in his room he heard the door open. *Great*, he thought, hastily wrapping a towel around his waist. He reentered the room to see Padmé, Doctors Rool and Durran standing there.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dr. Durran asked.

"I would think that is fairly obvious," Vader replied evenly.

“No, not the shower,” Durran replied testily. “This,” he said, picking up the synthetic patch that Vader had removed from his neck.

“I didn’t think I should get it wet,” he replied simply.

Padmé, relieved that he was alright, was amused by his cheekiness. *That’s the Anakin I remember*, she thought with a smile.

“I don’t think that is the point Dr. Durran is trying to make,” Dr. Rool said at this point.

“No, it most certainly isn’t,” Durran put in. “I don’t know what you’re trying to prove with this stunt, but I can assure you that none of us are impressed.”

Vader’s blue eyes grew cold as he stared at Durran. “I didn’t realize taking a shower was a stunt,” he replied evenly.

Durran grew uneasy under Vader’s stare, which, he decided, was every bit as intimidating and unnerving as the mask he had worn mere days ago.

“Please do not remove the patch again,” Dr. Rool said at last. “At least not without telling someone. That’s all we ask.”

Vader turned his eyes to her next. “Fair enough,” he replied, his gaze softening.

Rool looked at her colleague. “Shall we, Doctor?” she said, taking him by the arm.

Durran left without another word, but an uneasy feeling within him.

Vader watched them leave and then turned to Padmé with a smile. “I missed you when I woke up,” he said, reaching out to her.

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” she explained as he wrapped his arms around her waist. ‘You seemed to be having such a good sleep.’ She put her hands on his bare chest. “Did you enjoy your shower?”

He nodded. “Yes,” He replied. “Though I would have enjoyed it far more if you had shared it with me,” he added.

Padmé smiled, running her hands up to his broad, bare shoulders. “Now Ani, you promised to behave,” she reminded him playfully.

“That was yesterday,” he replied, pulling her close. “Besides, no heart monitor, remember?” he added, kissing the side of her neck

“You’re terrible,” she said, closing her eyes as he nuzzled her neck. How easy it would be to just give in to the feelings that he was evoking within her. It seemed the repairs to his body had unleashed and possibly augmented his already healthy libido. Padmé knew that she needed to be the one to keep things from going too far, to be the voice of reason and responsibility; but it was so difficult to be responsible when he smelled so good, when his body was warm and beautiful and so very close to hers...

“Lord Vader, I have made the inquiry you requested.”

Padmé and Vader looked around quickly to see a medidroid standing before them, completely oblivious to the tender moment it was interrupting.

“Thank you,” Vader replied, not releasing his wife.

“You’re most welcome, sir,” the droid replied. “It is perfectly acceptable for you to proceed.”

Vader nodded. “Wonderful,” he replied as Padmé suppressed a laugh.

“I have brought you some additional clothing as well,” the droid continued, setting down a pile of clothes. “Should you wish to change.”

“Thank you,” Padmé said, stepping away from her husband. “That was very thoughtful of you, wasn’t it, Ani?”

Vader simply nodded, as he inwardly cursed the ill timing of the hapless droid.

“Akiva, I’m beginning to think we’ve made a terrible mistake,” Dr. Durran said as they walked through the corridor together.

“You mean you think we ought to release him?” Rool asked in surprise.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Durran responded. “I mean Vader. Have we made a mistake by helping him become even stronger? Have we created a monster?”

Rool was chilled by his words. “I’m surprised to hear you talk this way, Rath,” she said at last. “I thought you believed that he has changed, as I do.”

Durran shook his head. “I’m not so sure, Akiva,” he said, worry creasing his brow. “Did you see the way he looked at me just now? The look I saw in his eyes was not one of a redeemed man; it was the look of a killer. I can’t help but think that we have made an already dangerous man even more so.”

Rool frowned. “Don’t say that. I refuse to believe that. Padmé Amidala is a highly intelligent woman. She would never allow herself to be manipulated in the way that you are implying.”

“Padme Amidala is a woman in love,” Durran returned. “And is so desperate to have back the man she once loved that she would go to any lengths to make it happen. Love is blind, Akiva; haven’t you ever heard that expression? How else could she accept him despite all the atrocities he has committed?”

Rool remained silent, not wanting to consider for an instant that what he was saying may be true. It sickened her to think of it. *No, it’s not true... he is different. He loves his wife, he loves his children... no monster could fake those kinds of emotions...*

“I think you’re wrong,” Rool replied at last. “I think that we have helped him in his quest to regain his humanity, Rath. Is he redeemed? No, not yet, not entirely. But is he the same man who has terrorized the galaxy for the past five years? No, I don’t believe so. I never would have agreed to help him if I believed that. And deep down inside you feel the same way.”

Durran sighed. “I don’t know how to feel or what to believe anymore,” he admitted. “All I know is that he scares me, and I’ll sleep better when he’s out of our care.”

“Then maybe we should grant him his wish,” Rool suggested. “Let him go home.”

Durran nodded. "I won't shirk my responsibility to him as a patient," he told her. "But perhaps there is a way to give him what he wants without doing so."

"I think there is," Rool replied. "And he has already suggested it. A medidroid."

Durran nodded. "Yes, yes I remember," he said, considering her words. "Well Akiva, perhaps that is the solution we are looking for."

"Shall we tell him?" she asked.

"Let's tell his wife," Durran suggested. "I've had quite enough of Darth Vader for one day."

Chapter 33

CHAPTER 33

"Excuse me, Mrs. Skywalker," Two-Four-Bee said as it stepped into the room. "Doctors Durran and Rool would like a word with you."

Padmé looked up at the droid. "What about?" she asked.

"I cannot say, milady," the droid replied. "Only they said it was rather urgent."

Padmé frowned and looked at Vader. "Seems they don't want me to know," he said. "Or else they'd just come here and talk to you."

"I suppose that's true," Padmé replied. "Or else you've scared them away," she suggested with a smile.

Vader raised his eyebrows. "Me?" he asked. "I can't imagine why you'd think that," he commented.

Padmé laughed as she stood up. "No, I'm sure you can't," she said, bending down and kissing his cheek. "I'll be right back."

Vader nodded and watched her go, annoyed that the doctors had taken her away. *What do they need to say to her that can't be said in front of me?* He wondered in irritation as he finished his meal.

"You wanted to see me, doctors?" Padmé asked as she entered their office.

"Yes Padmé," Dr. Rool said, as they both stood to greet her. "Please, have a seat."

Padmé sat down, looking at each of them in turn. "I have to admit that you have me quite alarmed," she said. "What do you need to say to me that can't be said in front of my husband?"

Rool looked at Durran. "Well, let's just say we are more comfortable speaking with you alone," she said trying to be diplomatic.

"I see," Padmé replied, realizing that her comment to Vader had been accurate; they *were* afraid of him. "So what is this about?"

"Dr. Rool and I have decided that it would be more conducive to his recovery if your husband were to go home," Dr. Durran replied. "It seems you were correct; the stress of being here is more than we anticipated, and it is hindering his recovery."

Padmé raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You have certainly changed your mind quickly," she observed. "Was my husband's...stunt as you put it, the impetus behind this decision?"

Durran glanced at Dr. Rool briefly. "Well, not entirely," he said, not terribly convincingly. "But we are confident that it would be in his best interest nonetheless."

Padmé smiled. *Who cares what made them change their mind; Ani can go home!* “How soon can we leave?”

“Well, there are several stipulations we must insist upon,” Dr. Rool said, “in order for us to release him.”

“Of course,” Padmé replied. “I will follow your instructions to the letter.”

“First of all, one of our medidroids will accompany you back to Delaya,” Durran replied. “That way should something happen, he’ll have immediate attention.”

Padmé nodded, smiling to herself as she remembered that it had in fact been her husband who had initially made that suggestion. “That’s a reasonable request,” she said. “Anything else?”

“Only this list of instructions,” Dr. Rool said, handing Padmé a datapad. “It’s mainly a list of precautions and instructions for his day to day health care and exercise regimen.”

Padmé nodded, glancing over the list. She smiled as she did so, imagining her husband’s reaction to it.

“So when can we leave then?” she asked looking back up at doctors.

“As soon as you wish,” Dr. Rool replied. “I’ll make the preparations.”

Padmé returned to Vader’s room, the smile not leaving her face. *Luke and Leia will be so excited*, she thought. *I can’t wait for them to see their father now that he’s whole again.*

Vader looked up as the door opened, and smiled when he saw his wife enter the room. “You look rather pleased,” he commented.

“I am pleased,” she replied. “Very pleased.”

Vader nodded. “Indeed,” he said as she sat down across from him. “Are you going to tell me why? Or do I need to use one of my mind tricks on you?” he asked with a smile.

Padmé snorted. “They never worked on me, Ani, you know that,” she replied. “But you can try if you wish.”

Vader laughed. “No, I’d rather just have you tell me,” he said. “Your mind is not an easy one to read, and I’m not supposed to over do it, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” she laughed. “How would you feel about going home?”

“Going home?” he said. “Are you serious?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s what they wanted to tell me,” she explained. ‘They feel that, how did they put it? Being at home would be more conducive to your recovery,’ she said with a smile. “And realize that you are under too much stress here to allow you to properly convalesce.”

Vader smiled. “Fantastic,” he said. “So when do we leave?”

“Not so fast,” she said, assuming a more serious demeanor. “There is a rather lengthy list of instructions here that you must agree to before they’ll release you.”

“Of course,” he replied, folding his arms over his chest. “What instructions might they be?”

“Well, let’s see,” she said, looking at the list on the datapad.

“No strenuous exercise,” she began, reading from the datapad, “but walking daily, increasing the distance slowly; continue high calcium high protein diet until the medidroid determines you can begin a regular diet:” she looked up at him at this point. “They decided your idea of taking a droid with us is a good one after all,” she told him.

“How wise of them,” he commented. “Anything else?”

“Oh yes, much more,” she said, looking back down at the list. ‘Let’s see; it says here you will have periods of high energy bursts followed by extreme fatigue, and that this is normal and your body will regulate this over time. The medidroid will monitor you and decrease monitoring over time. You must return in one month for follow up testing and examination. If you have any shortness of breath, painful breathing or chest pains, swelling in your legs or arms weakness or dizziness, you must notify the medidroid and arrange immediate transport back here.’ She looked up at him. “Well? Think you can live with that?”

Vader nodded. “Quite a lengthy list,” he commented.

“Yes, it is,” she replied, suppressing a smile at his obvious disappointment that one item from the list was missing. “Oh, there is one more thing here,” she remarked casually.

“What else?” he asked, almost afraid to know.

“It says here that you can resume marital relations immediately,” she replied, “and that they are actually good for your cardiovascular system.”

Vader laughed out loud. “Ah, so the doctors are *ordering* that we resume marital relations, is that what you’re saying?”

Padmé laughed. “Well, not in so many words,” she said.

“Oh I think they are,” he said, smiling broadly. ‘Far be it from me to disobey doctors’ orders,’ he added. “So when do we go home?”

“Dr. Rool said she would make the arrangements,” Padmé replied. “So hopefully sometime this afternoon.”

“So we’ll be home when the children are waking up in the morning,” Vader said, smiling at the thought of it. “I can’t wait to see them, Padmé. Just to be able to finally kiss their precious faces will be like a dream come true,” he added.

Padmé smiled. “I can’t wait to see them either,” she said. “I can only imagine how surprised and excited they will be to see you.”

Vader nodded. “They won’t even recognize me,” he reflected. “I look so different now.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, you do,” she said, touching his face. “You look like you did five years ago. It’s a miracle.”

“Well, the hair is a little shorter,” he said, rubbing the stubble on his head. “But it’s coming along.”

“Yes, it is,” she said. “You’ll need a shave soon too,” she commented, running her hands down the sides of his face.

Vader smiled, pulling her close to him. “As I recall, you like that scruffy, unkempt look,” he said.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, that’s true,” she said. “Makes you look so sexy,” she added.

“That’s good to know,” he said, pulling her close to kiss her.

“Excuse me sir, but Doctor Rool has ordered one more examination before you leave,” a medidroid announced as it entered the room.

Vader looked at Padmé and shook his head. “I can’t wait to get out of here,” he muttered.

Padmé giggled as he released her and permitted the droid to commence.

“I’m going to get packed,” she told Vader as he removed the sleep shirt and sat down on the examination table.

He nodded. “Hurry,” he said simply.

Padmé smiled. “I will,” she replied. She left him in the capable hands of Two-Four-Bee and headed off to her quarters.

Chapter 34

CHAPTER 34

Humbarine

Obi-Wan Kenobi had spent the past forty-eight hours in hiding, and was beginning to grow anxious. He had no way of knowing what was happening on Delaya, if Padmé was even still there. Palpatine knew that she was alive; how long would it take before he found her and the twins? Palpatine was single-minded to the point of madness; Kenobi knew that he would stop at nothing to find Padmé, and when he found out that the twins were indeed alive, he would either take them or destroy them. *I mustn't let that happen — I vowed to protect Padmé and her children, and I will not break that promise.*

Stealthily, using the Force to cloak his presence, he snuck on board a ship that was bound for Alderaan, inching his way ever closer to Delaya. *Perhaps another 3 days and I'll be there... if I'm lucky...* he thought as he hid himself in the cargo hold. *I won't let him take your children, Padmé; I promise you.*

Polis Massa

"So, it looks like you're going home," Dr. Rool said as she entered Vader's room. The droid had almost finished its examination.

"Yes," Vader replied simply.

Rool watched as the droid performed the final part of its examination. "Did your wife go over the list of precautions with you?"

"Yes," Vader replied between deep breaths. "She did."

"Any questions?" Rool asked.

Vader shook his head. "None that I can think of," he said.

"Good," Rool replied. "Two-four-bee will be accompanying you home," she told him, "since he's already familiar with your case."

Vader merely nodded. "How long can I expect his company?" he asked.

"Well, let's see where things stand in a month," she replied. "Hopefully it won't be long."

"Let's hope so," he agreed.

"Oh yes, I've arranged for a medical capsule to be loaded onto your ship," she remembered. "Not that I anticipate you'll need it, but should an emergency arise, it could mean the difference between life and death for you."

"I understand," Vader replied.

Padmé returned at this point, a bundle of clothes and a pair of boots in her arms. Vader smiled when he saw her.

"I thought you might be more comfortable in these," she said, setting down the boots and holding up the tunic and trousers.

"No doubt of that," he replied. "Thank you, angel."

"You're welcome," she replied.

"You are in excellent health," Two-Four-Bee pronounced.

"Does that mean we can leave?" Vader asked.

Rool nodded. "Yes, whenever you're ready."

"I think we're both more than ready," Padmé said with a smile, linking her arm around Vader's.

Dr. Rool nodded. "I'll alert your pilot to prepare for your departure," she said as she headed for the door.

"Dr. Rool," Vader said, causing her to stop and turn around.

"Yes?"

"Thank you," he said. "Words cannot adequately convey my gratitude."

Rool smiled. "You're most welcome," she replied. "I was about to call you Lord Vader, but somehow I don't think that's appropriate any more, is it?"

Vader looked at Padmé. "Perhaps not," he replied. "I'm not entirely certain anymore."

Rool nodded. "May I ask something of you?"

"You may," Vader replied.

"Not many people get a second chance at life," she said. "You've been given one — use it to make a difference in the galaxy."

Vader was taken aback by her words, and was unsure how to reply.

Padmé looked up at him, placing her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Dr. Rool," she said, looking back at the physician. "You've given our family a fresh start, and there is no way we can ever thank you enough."

Rool smiled at her. "Good luck to you both," she said, keenly aware of Vader's silence. *Perhaps Rath is right... perhaps he will always be Darth Vader no matter what he looks like.* "We'll see you in a month," she said at last and then left them both to contact the pilot who would take them back to Delaya.

"Time to get dressed," Padmé said as the droid shuffled out of the room.

"Are you going to help me?" Vader asked with a smile.

"Do you need help?" she asked with a smile.

"Absolutely," he replied. "I'm still convalescing, remember?"

Padmé laughed as she helped him with the dark brown tunic. "Yes, you're so very helpless, aren't you?"

Vader nodded. “Yes, in your presence I’m completely helpless.”

Padmé smiled. “I see,” she said, buttoning his tunic. ‘The Hero with no Fear, helpless,’ she teased. “Please!”

Vader laughed as he watched her small hands work on the buttons of the tunic.

. “Well, even heroes have their weaknesses,” he told her. She looked up into his eyes.

“Is that what I am?” she asked.

“Well, yes and no,” he decided, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I am helpless to resist you, and yet you are a source of great strength for me. You and our children, my love for all of you, your love for me— that gives me strength.”

Padmé took his face in her hands. “Then use that strength, Ani,” she implored him. “Use it to eradicate the darkness inside of you. Use our love to destroy the hatred and anger that still dwells within you.”

Vader could feel the depth of her love, and it moved him. *Can I ever be who I was again? Is there truly a way back?*

“Let’s go home, Padmé,” he said at last, not wishing to make promises to her that he wasn’t certain he could keep.

Padmé nodded, disappointed in his lack of response. *Yet, he did not refuse to consider it either, she reminded herself. So there is still hope.*

“Lord Vader? Senator Amidala?”

Both turned to see Two-Four-Bee in the room. It held in its arms the suit and mask that had once defined Vader’s existence.

“What shall I do with this?” it asked.

Vader looked down at his wife and then released her. He walked over to the droid and took the suit from it. He unfolded it, and, finding his lightsaber, unclipped it from the belt. Then he dropped the suit onto the floor, and looked at the droid.

“Burn it,” he said simply, and then returned to his wife. ‘Come,’ he said, taking her hand. “It’s time to go home.”

Chapter 35

CHAPTER 35

Within a few hours, Vader and Padmé were traveling through hyperspace on their way back to the Alderaan System. As predicted, Vader was still experiencing bouts of fatigue, despite his rapid recovery. All the excitement and preparation for departure had done him in, and he was sound asleep in the passenger lounge.

Padmé sat in a chair beside him, watching him as he slept. She too was tired, but the excitement of going home to Luke and Leia was too much to allow her to sleep. She smiled as she thought of how happy they would be to see him, how surprised they would be at his new appearance. *Or will they be surprised at all? Knowing them they'll already know.* It had always been impossible to surprise Luke and Leia, they had such a strong Force sense even at a young age that they were able to foresee virtually everything she did, and sometimes even what she said. While she was used to it, Padmé knew that Dormé was unnerved by the twins' psychic abilities. The thought of her hand maiden brought a frown to Padmé's face. *What have you been up to in our absence?* She thought. *What lies have you been trying to fill our children's minds with?*

Vader started to stir in his sleep, causing Padmé to look in his direction. She got up and went to his side, kneeling on the floor beside the cot. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She smiled. "Hi," she said. "Did you have a nice rest?"

He nodded. "Are we almost home?" he asked, sitting up. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A few hours," she told him. 'I'm not sure where we are,' she added. "We've been in hyperspace over two hours now."

Vader nodded. "Then we should be almost there," he reflected, holding his hand out to her. Padmé stood up and sat beside him.

"Did you sleep at all?" he asked, putting his arm around her.

Padmé shook her head as she snuggled against him. "No," she replied. "I'm too excited to sleep."

Vader smiled and kissed the top of her head. "It hardly seems real, does it?" he commented. "I keep expecting to wake up."

"Yes, I know what you mean," she replied. "I wish I could say the twins will be surprised, but I've discovered just how difficult it is to surprise those two at all. Reminds me of trying to surprise you," she added looking up at him.

"Well, it's not easy to surprise a Force sensitive," he told her. "Unless you're a Force sensitive yourself," he added with a smile.

"You mean you can surprise them?" she asked him. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes, I can," he told her. "And I will. They won't know we're coming until we walk through the door."

Padmé smiled. "I can't wait to see the look on their faces," she said.

"Neither can I," Vader replied. "I can't wait to get you alone, either," he added, kissing her temple.

"Come on, let's get you up and walking," Padmé said as she stood up. She held her hands out to him.

"Must I?" he asked, taking her hands. "I'd much rather just sit here with you."

"Yes, I know that," she said, urging him up to his feet. "But you'll get stiff if you sit too long without movement."

"Very well," he said, standing up. 'You're more efficient than any medidroid,' he commented with a smile. "Perhaps we can leave Two-Four-Bee shut down permanently."

Padmé laughed. "Nice try," she said. "Now come on, twice around the room at least."

"Is that an order?" he teased.

Padmé stood with her hands on her hips. "Yes it is," she said. "So get moving."

Vader smiled and began his laps under the watchful eyes of his wife.

"One more," she said after he had done three already.

"Yes milady," he replied as he did one more turn around the room. "May I stop now?"

"Yes, you may," she said.

"Thank you," he said, sitting down again.

"Now lie down on your stomach," she instructed.

"What for?"

"Just do it," she replied with a smile. "I promise, you won't regret it."

"Very well," he said, complying.

"Now," she said, sitting beside him on the cot. 'Relax,' she ordered as she brought her hands to his shoulders and commenced massaging them. "How is that?" she asked.

Vader closed his eyes. "Incredible," he murmured.

Padmé smiled. "You always did love a nice massage," she said.

"Uh huh," he murmured, his body relaxing under the expert touch of his wife.

"Ani, do you remember that ten days we spent on Naboo?" she asked. "After you were knighted?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, I remember it well," he replied with a smile.

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful if we could take the children there?” she said thinking aloud. “They’ve never seen Naboo. They would love it there, love the water,” she added.

“Perhaps we can do that someday,” he said, not wishing to dash her hopes. “But not as long as Palpatine lives,” he cautioned.

“No, of course not,” she replied, the thought of him sending a chill down her spine. “You know, Luke and Leia were conceived during that time,” she told him, pushing all thoughts of Palpatine from her mind.

“I’m not surprised,” he replied with a smile. “As I recall, you were rather insatiable during those ten days.”

“I wasn’t the only one,” she returned, bending down and kissing his cheek.

“Yes, that is true,” he admitted. He turned over to look at her. “I’ve never been able to get enough of you,” he told her.

“Nor I you,” she replied. “Of course, having children will make such spontaneity rather difficult,” she added.

“Well, we’ll just have to learn to be creative,” he said with a grin.

Padmé raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

Vader nodded. “Yes, there are always solutions when one is motivated,” he told her.

Padmé laughed. “Well I look forward to seeing your... creative solutions,” she said, bending down to kiss him.

Planet Delaya

“Leia, you’re being difficult,” Dormé said in exasperation. “What difference does it make what color your socks are??”

“I don’t like those,” Leia replied peevishly, folding her arms over her chest. “They always bunch up in my shoes.”

“They are almost brand new!” Dormé exclaimed. “I bought them myself not two months ago!”

“I want the ones Daddy bought me,” Leia insisted.

Dormé rolled her eyes. “Why doesn’t *that* surprise me,” she muttered under her breath as she dug through the drawer for the pair of socks Leia insisted upon.

“Why don’t you like my daddy?” Leia asked, reading easily the thoughts in Dormé’s mind.

Dormé didn’t turn around, nor did she answer. Finally she found the socks. “Is this the pair, your highness?” she asked.

Leia nodded and reached out for them. Dormé handed them to her, pretending she hadn’t heard the child’s question.

“I know you don’t,” Leia said at last as she put on her socks. “Why is that?”

Dormé looked at Leia, realizing she should have known better than to even think about Darth Vader in the presence of one of his children. “I do like him,” she lied, helping Leia with the socks. “Why do you think I don’t?”

“Because you think mean things about him,” Leia replied.

Dormé looked at the child, astonished by her ability to see through her. *She’s getting stronger every day*, she reflected. *They both are.*

“Well sometimes adults don’t get along, Leia,” Dormé said at last. “Just like sometimes you and Luke don’t get along, right? That doesn’t mean you don’t like one another.”

“Luke and I always get along,” Leia countered. “He’s my best friend.”

Dormé nodded. “Yes, I know he is,” she replied with a smile. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Uh huh,” Leia said skipping out of the room ahead of Dormé. She headed down the stairs and joined Luke and Neeja at the table.

“Are Daddy and Mommy coming home today?” Luke asked, just as either he or Leia did every morning.

“We don’t know,” Dormé said as she set a plate of breakfast in front of each of them. “But I don’t think so, Luke. They would have contacted us if they were.”

“Oh,” Luke replied sadly, poking around at his eggs with his fork.

“Don’t worry Luke,” Neeja said, trying to soothe the young boy. “I’m sure they will be home soon.”

Luke looked up at the Jedi Master. “Do you really think so, Master Neeja?”

Neeja nodded. “I have foreseen it,” he added, tapping one of his graying temples with one finger.

Luke smiled. Both he and Leia liked Neeja immensely, and were intrigued by his calm, mystical personality. He reminded them somewhat of Obi-Wan, who they had come to grow very fond of during the past five years, and whose present absence in their lives they could not understand.

“Can we go swimming after breakfast?” Leia asked.

“Perhaps,” Dormé said. “We’ll have to see how warm it is outside.”

“It’s warm,” Neeja said. “I was outside earlier.”

“Good,” Dormé said. “Maybe you can take them while I clean up the breakfast dishes,” she suggested.

“Certainly,” he replied, sensing that Dormé was simply trying to get the twins out of her hair for a while.

Luke and Leia looked at one another with a smile. *I like Master Neeja*, Leia thought.

So do I, Luke agreed. *He makes me think of Obi-Wan.*

Dormé wants to kiss Obi-Wan, Leia said, giggling slightly.

That's yucky, Luke thought.

Neeja had to suppress a chuckle as he witnessed the unusual conversation between Anakin's twins. *Remarkable*, he thought with a smile.

"Master Halcyon, Miss Dormé, a ship has just landed on the landing platform," a sentry announced as he entered the kitchen. "It bears Alderaani markings."

Dormé nodded. "Perhaps the Viceroy," she suggested. "Show him in."

"Of course."

Luke and Leia stopped eating, as though they sensed something, someone.

"It's not the Viceroy," Luke said at last.

"Who is it then?" asked Dormé.

"It's Mommy and Daddy!" Leia answered, as both twins stood up and rushed out of the room.

"Luke! Leia! Come back here!" Dormé called after them.

"Let them be," Neeja said. "They're right, you know."

"Of course they are," she replied. "They always are."

Luke and Leia ran through the forest, following the sentry as he made his way back to the landing platform. They passed him just as the door was opening on the platform. The guard came up and stood behind them as the landing ramp descended.

"Mommy!!!" the twins cried in unison as Padmé appeared.

Padmé smiled and turned to Vader who stepped out onto the ramp with her.

Upon seeing their father, the twins stopped in their tracks. They knew who he was, despite the drastic change in his appearance; his eyes were the same eyes that they had seen looking at them with such utter adoration mere days ago. And when he smiled at them, they ran.

Vader ran too, the sight of his children filling his heart utterly. Padmé watched as the three of them met, as though for the first time. Vader picked them up in his arms, kissing each of them in turn over and over, as though trying to make up for the previous five years. The twins giggled, delighted with their father's overt affection. They touched his face, rubbed the stubble on his chin, on his head, causing him to laugh out loud. He laughed with joy, for he had never felt such joy in his life as he did at that moment. *Now I am complete*, he thought as tears filled his eyes. Luke and Leia had their arms wrapped around his neck, pressing their faces against his as though they never wanted to release him as Padmé walked up to them. Vader looked at her, his eyes expressing the depth of emotion that he felt at that moment. Padmé felt it too, and it brought tears to her own eyes as well. She put her arms around the twins as the four of them simply stood in an embrace, truly a family at last.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

“Did we surprise you?” Padmé asked as they walked back through the forest.

“Sort of,” Leia said. “We didn’t know you were here until your ship landed.”

Vader and Padmé looked at one another. “See what I mean?” Padmé said to him with a smile.

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he replied with a smile. “It’s not easy to surprise these two, is it?”

“But that’s okay,” Leia said, squeezing her father’s hand. “We were surprised when we saw you, Daddy. We didn’t know that you were all better now.”

“No?” Vader asked, looking down at his daughter. “So I *did* surprise you then,” he asked with a smile.

“Uh huh,” Leia replied, gazing up at him with undisguised adoration. “You’re beautiful, Daddy.”

Vader looked at Padmé and laughed. “That’s the first time anyone has ever called me that, Leia,” he said. “Thank you.”

Dormé was wiping down the table when she heard voices and figured that the twins had returned with the visitors. She looked up, and dropped the cloth in her hand when she saw Anakin Skywalker standing before her, a twin holding each of his hands.

“Look Dormé,” Leia said excitedly. ‘Daddy is all better now!’ she proclaimed. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

Dormé didn’t answer right away, but merely stared at Leia’s father. “He looks very well,” she commented, fighting to keep her feelings to herself. *Beautiful is an understatement*, she thought, looking admiringly at him. ‘Looks like the surgery was a success,’ she added. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Vader replied, seeing the rather obvious admiration in her eyes and in her thoughts.

Padmé came up to him and linked her arm through his. “Isn’t it wonderful, Dormé?” she said with a smile, looking up at him. Vader looked at her and smiled, putting his hand over hers.

Dormé watched them, the love between them obvious, the physical attraction between them equally so. A pang of jealousy rippled through her as she watched them together; no doubt their physical relationship would soon resume, if it had not done so already. She remembered how Padmé used to confide in her how passionate a lover her husband was, and how envious she had always been of that relationship, knowing that the man she longed for was so unattainable. *Or just plain obtuse*, she reflected in frustration.

“Master Ani!! It’s so good to see you fully functional again!” Threepio declared as he shuffled into the room. “And who is this?” he added, in a tone that hinted of indignation when he saw Two-Four-Bee enter the room.

Padmé turned to the medidroid, having momentarily forgotten its existence. “This is Two-Four-Bee,” she said. “The medidroid that the facility sent to monitor Anakin’s health for the next few weeks.”

“I see,” Threepio responded, shuffling over to the droid. ‘I am See Threepio,’ he told his rival. “Human cyborg relations,” he added for good measure.

Two-Four-Bee simply nodded in response. “Understood,” it replied as it shuffled away.

“Well, how rude!” Threepio exclaimed, watching the snooty droid leave the room.

“Threepio, I have a job for you,” Vader said.

“Oh yes sir,” Threepio replied at once. ‘What can I do for you?’
“Take apart that chamber upstairs,” he replied. “I don’t want to see a single piece of it left standing by nightfall.”

“That is rather a large task, sir,” Threepio replied. “But I shall endeavor to do my best,” he added stoically.

“Good,” Vader replied. “See to it at once.”

Threepio left the room, confused by the strange inconsistencies in the man before him. While he looked like Master Ani, he certainly didn’t act like him. Was he Master Ani? Or was he still Darth Vader? It did not compute, and Threepio was frustrated that his circuits couldn’t resolve it.

“Your recovery is miraculous, Anakin,” Neeja said as he, Vader and Padmé walked outside, the twins never far from their father.

“It is,” Vader replied. “I didn’t think it was possible, the emperor assured me that it wasn’t; I should have realized that he had lied,” he said as he watched his children go up to the edge of the lake behind the house.

Neeja nodded a frown on his face. “I hope now you see what an evil monster he is, Anakin.”

Vader looked at his wife. “Yes,” he replied. “I know all too well what he is, Neeja. And I plan to make him pay for all that he has done.”

“Destroying the Sith is part of the prophecy,” Neeja said, nodding his head. “So long as your reasons for destroying him are not rooted in Darkness.”

“I have very good reasons for wanting to destroy him,” Vader countered. “He lied to me, Neeja. He drove a wedge between my wife and I and then lied to me, telling me that I had killed her, when in fact she was very much alive.”

Neeja nodded. “And what about his part in the destruction of your relationship with Obi-Wan?” he asked. “Surely you realize now that he was responsible for that too.”

Vader frowned, the thought of Obi-Wan sent a wave of anger through him. "Obi-Wan tried to turn my wife against me," he said. "He used her to get to me, to kill me, and then left me to die because he didn't have the guts to kill me outright. He had as much a part in the destruction of that relationship as Sidious did."

Padmé hated to hear the anger in his voice, see it in his eyes. *Heaven help us all if Obi-Wan ever finds us here... the results will be as catastrophic as they were five years ago.*

"Daddy, can you go swimming with us?" Leia called back to him. "The water is nice and warm."

Vader looked over at his children, all trace of anger evaporating immediately. "That sounds like fun," he called back to his daughter. 'But you two aren't dressed for swimming,' he added. "Why don't we go back to the house and get into some swim suits? Assuming I have such a thing," he added, looking at Padmé.

She smiled. "I'm sure we can come up with something," she replied. "Neeja? Are you a swimmer?"

"Only when I have to be," he replied with a smile. "Besides, I think this family needs some time alone. I will gladly remain in the house. I need to contact the viceroy about arranging my transport."

"Where are you going?" Vader asked him.

"I want to visit Master Yoda," he replied. "Let him know what has been happening. I'm sure he will be pleased to learn of your transformation, Anakin."

Vader nodded. "Come along then," he said as the twins took his hands. "Let's go swimming."

The warm weather was perfect for a day spent out doors, and the twins made sure that their parents spent every moment of it with them, including eating a picnic lunch on the beach beside the lake.

For Padmé, it was like a dream come true. How many times she had longed for the familial bliss that she was realizing now that Luke and Leia's father had been made whole again. At the back of her mind, she knew that things were not perfect, that Anakin still harbored much Darth Vader in him. She had no delusions that things were idyllic; yet at this moment, right now, they were.

Padmé watched from the beach as Luke and Leia played with their father in the water, the joy that emanated from them all as brilliant as the sunshine above them. *They are your strength, Anakin, she thought. It is their love that will bring you from the darkness. Let it guide you.*

"Well I think it's time we all went back inside," Padmé said as the three of them finally emerged from the water. "You've worn out your father," she added, smiling at Vader.

"I'm fine," he replied, picking up the twins. "Never better."

"Yes, well it's getting late, and I'm sure Dormé has dinner waiting for us by now," Padmé said as she wrapped a large towel around Vader's shoulders and the twins. "And I'm sure after all that swimming you must be very hungry."

“I am!” Luke replied at once.

“Me too!” added Leia. “Are you going to have dinner with us too, Daddy?” she asked hopefully.

Vader smiled at her. “Yes my lady, I am indeed,” he said, kissing her wet face.

“And I’m hungry too, so let’s be off.”

Dormé did indeed have dinner prepared and was just setting the table when they arrived back at the house. Padmé and Vader took the twins upstairs and got them dried off and changed for dinner. Luke and Leia raced downstairs as soon as they were dressed, leaving Padmé and Vader alone.

“Guess we ought to get changed,” Padmé said as they stood in the corridor outside the twins’ room.

“Yes, good idea,” Vader replied.

“Come on,” she said, taking his hand. With heart pounding, Padmé lead her husband down the hallway into their room. Most of the hyperbaric chamber had been dismantled by now, and Threepio was still working away at it when they entered the room.

“Threepio, leave the room,” Vader told the droid. “We need some privacy.”

Padmé felt her face grow warm, her heart racing with anticipation of what she expected would happen as soon as the droid left the room. For days now he had made it quite clear that he was just waiting for an opportunity to be alone with her, and now here it was. She watched him as he used the Force to close and lock the door behind Threepio, almost hitting the droid on the golden behind on his way out. And then he turned to her.

The moment their eyes met, she felt her knees grow weak. In an instant she was in his arms, neither of them caring about dinner, or the fact that there were people downstairs waiting for them. All that mattered was their need for the other, and the undeniable longing that filled them both at that moment.

“Where are Mommy and Daddy?” Leia asked as she poked at her supper.

Dormé exchanged a glance with Neeja, whose face bore the same impassive expression as ever. Dormé felt she knew exactly why they had been delayed. *They’ve been apart for five years... what did you expect?* She told herself.

“They’ll be along,” Dormé said simply. “Now go ahead and eat before it gets cold.”

Leia sighed, and commenced eating; hoping her parents would join them soon.

Chapter 37

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"Mommy, where have you been?" Leia demanded indignantly when Padmé appeared finally.

"I needed to shower and get dressed," Padmé replied, sitting down. "Miss Nosy," she added with a smile.

"Where is Daddy?" Luke asked.

"Well, you two wore him out so much that he's fast asleep," Padmé replied, helping herself to the meal in front of her. "He still needs lots of rest, so I didn't wake him."

Luke and Leia were disappointed, but accepted their mother's explanation. Dormé, however, was not so easily fooled. She recognized the glow in Padmé's cheeks; she had seen it many times when Padmé would return home to her apartment after a tryst with her Jedi lover. Dormé found herself envious again, as she had so many times before. Padmé had with Anakin what she so desperately wanted with Obi-Wan Kenobi; his utter devotion, his burning desire, his undying love.

"Dormé? Did you hear me?"

Dormé shook herself from her daydream to look at Padmé. "Sorry, what did you say?" she asked.

Padmé watched Dormé, wondering if Dormé had realized what had really gone on upstairs. "I said that this is delicious," Padmé said. "Thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome," Dormé said, standing up and starting to clear the dishes. She felt uneasy in Padmé's presence all of a sudden, and wanted to leave the room.

Padmé watched her leave, more puzzled than ever by her odd behavior.

"Looks like Daddy isn't the only one who's tired," Padmé commented as Luke yawned for the second time.

"I'm not tired," Luke protested automatically.

"Yes you are," Padmé replied, finishing her meal quickly. 'Come on you two,' you need a bath after playing in the beach all day."

"Can we have bubbles?" Leia asked excitedly, grabbing her mother's hand as she stood up.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, of course," she replied with a smile. "What's a bath without bubbles?"

Luke and Leia followed their mother upstairs and into the fresher, where she started the bath running. "Now please try to keep the water in the tub this time," she chided them gently.

"Luke makes me splash," Leia protested as Padmé pulled her tee-shirt over her head.

"I do not!" protested Luke as he struggled out of his own shirt. "That game was your idea!"

"Okay, I don't need to know whose idea it was," Padmé said at last. "Just keep the water in the tub, okay?"

"Okay," Luke and Leia replied in unison. They scrambled into the sudsy water, their small bodies almost entirely submerged in the sea of bubbles.

Padmé knelt down at the side of the tub and proceeded to wash the twins' hair, using the clear running water to rinse it out.

"So did you have fun today?" she asked, resting her chin on her hands on the side of the tub.

"Yes, lots and lots of fun," Leia replied, picking up handfuls of bubbles and blowing them at her brother.

"Daddy looks so different," Luke said thoughtfully. "Is that how he looked before the fire?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she told him. "Only he had much more hair than he does right now."

"Is my hair the same color as his?" Luke asked hopefully.

Padmé smiled. "Yes Luke, you look very much like he did when he was a boy. You know he and I met when we were both just children."

"Did you get married when you were children?" Luke asked.

"Of course not!" Leia declared. "Children can't get married!"

"No, they can't," Padmé agreed. 'But we knew that we would get married some day,' she added. "In fact, your daddy made this for me when he was just a boy," she told them, pulling the japor snippet from under her blouse. "I've worn it every day since then."

"Daddy made that?" Leia asked, looking at the pendant as though for the first time.

"Yes he did," Padmé replied with a smile. 'He was a very clever child,' she told them. "Just like you," she added, taking their chins in her hands. The twins smiled, pleased at their mother's praise.

Padmé turned and looked back around the room, realizing she'd forgotten something. "I'll be right back," she said standing up. "I forgot the towels."

She left the twins, leaving the door open so she could hear any signs of tomfoolery. The linen closet was at the other end of the corridor. When she got there, she saw that the only bath towels left were up on the top shelf. Reaching up on her tip toes, she pulled them down, bringing down a box of winter clothing with it, spilling its contents on the floor.

"Great," she muttered, getting down on her knees to pick up the clothing.

A short time later, having replaced the box on the shelf, Padmé returned to the fresher. Before she even reached the room, she heard the distinctive sound of splashing. She walked

into the room, about to admonish the twins when the sight before her caused her to stop in her tracks.

“Anakin!”

Vader was in the room, wearing only his sleeping pants, engaged in an all out splashing war with his children. Water was everywhere: the walls, the floor, he was drenched with it. The twins were enjoying themselves immensely, and, judging by the enormous grin on his face, so was their father.

Upon hearing his name, Vader turned to see his wife standing there, a look of utter surprise on her face. He looked back at the children, a sheepish expression on his face. “Uh oh,” he said.

“Busted!” Leia declared gleefully, pointing a chubby finger at him. This caused Luke to burst out laughing, ending in a serious case of the hiccups. Vader walked through the puddles to where his wife stood taking in the entire scene with wide eyes.

“Hi,” he said with a smile. “Guess we got a little carried away,” he remarked sheepishly.

“Just a little,” Padmé agreed, looking around at the mess. “You’re as bad as they are,” she added with a smile.

Vader nodded his head. “Yes, I’m afraid so,” he said, looking over his shoulder and winking at the twins.

“Come on, let’s get them dried off,” Padmé said, stepping carefully around the puddles on the floor. “Although it looks like you’re just as wet as they are.”

“Well I have an idea about that,” Vader said, grabbing her and hugging her close despite her squeals of protest. The twins giggled madly, making Luke’s hiccups even worse.

“You are going to pay for this, Anakin Skywalker,” she laughed as she finally stopped struggling.

Vader merely laughed, enjoying himself too much to care about the possible consequences of his actions.

Finally Padmé and Vader managed to get the twins dried off and into their pajamas.

“I’m glad you’re home, Daddy,” Luke told his father as Vader tucked him in. “I missed you so much.”

Vader smiled, and sat on the edge of his son’s bed. “I missed you too, Luke,” he replied, running his fingers through Luke’s baby soft hair. “Very much.”

Luke smiled, trying to hold back a yawn as he did so. But his father noticed nonetheless. “Time for sleeping,” he said, pulling the covers up over him. He leaned down to the boy and kissed him tenderly on the brow. ‘Good night son,’ he said. “Sweet dreams.”

Vader stood up and watched as Luke drifted off, Spotty safely tucked in the crook of one arm. Love filled him as he watched his small boy succumb to sleep, love unlike any he’d ever known. The connection he felt with his children was so powerful it almost frightened him

with its intensity. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would lay down his life for either of them without a moment's hesitation.

It wasn't long before Luke was sound asleep, and Vader turned to Leia who was getting her hair braided by her mother. "Goodnight to you too, milady," he said, bending down to kiss her goodnight. "Sweet dreams."

"Are you hungry?" Padmé asked. "There's dinner downstairs if you are."

"I am actually," Vader replied. "I worked up quite an appetite today," he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled too, keeping her eyes on the braid she was making from Leia's long dark hair. "I'll be down in a few minutes," she told him.

"Okay," he said. "Goodnight Leia."

"Goodnight Daddy," she said, holding her arms out to hug him.

Vader bent down again and embraced her, kissing her once again. "Goodnight little one," he said. "Sleep well."

Vader headed downstairs to the kitchen to find some dinner, and found Neeja making a cup of tea.

"Good evening, Anakin," the Jedi Master greeted him. "I thought you'd retired for the night."

"No, just crashed for a little while," Vader replied, opening the refrigerator. "I think I can expect to do that for a while," he added.

Neeja nodded. "Bail Organa has arranged for me to go to Dagobah," he said as Vader sat down at the table.

"Oh?" Vader asked, looking up at him. "What takes you there?"

"Master Yoda is there," Neeja replied, taking a sip of his tea. "I am going to see him."

"I didn't realize that," Vader replied. "What are your plans once you find him?"

Neeja studied the young man before him before he replied. "Well, I suppose that depends on you, Anakin."

"On me?"

Neeja nodded. "On whether you truly are Anakin Skywalker now, or still Darth Vader. Do you even know? I certainly don't."

Vader shook his head. "No, neither do I," he admitted. "More and more I feel like I can relate to Anakin Skywalker, to what being him was like; but when I think of Sidious, of Obi-Wan," he said, his hands clenching into fists, "I'm not so sure who I am."

Neeja frowned, disturbed by Vader's admission. "There is still much darkness in you," he said. "But you have already taken huge steps back towards the light, Anakin. Sparing me, for instance. If there wasn't a part of you that was still Anakin Skywalker, you'd not have done that."

“No, I suppose not,” Vader replied. ‘All I know is that I have a debt that must be paid,’ he declared. “One that will be paid in blood by Darth Sidious.”

Neeja understood Vader’s need for retribution; yet he worried that exacting it would cost the young man what was left of his soul. “Don’t let your hatred for Sidious destroy you, Anakin,” he cautioned. “Revenge isn’t worth the price of your soul.”

With that Neeja left him alone to ponder where his destiny would take him.

Chapter 38

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"Like some company?"

Vader looked up to see Padmé. "Yes, very much so," he replied. "Please join me."

Padmé sat down across from him, pleased to see him eating real food again.

"Kids asleep?" he asked.

"Luke is," she replied. "He is a great sleeper. He can fall asleep anywhere, and sleep through anything."

Vader smiled. "He didn't get that from me," he commented. "And Leia? She's still awake?"

"She was when I left the room," Padmé replied, standing up and walking over to the refrigerator. 'She's too excited to go to sleep. She's become quite a daddy's girl,' she said, looking back at him with a smile. She returned to the table and set down a large glass of milk in front of him. "You need lots of calcium, remember?" she said.

"I remember," he said, picking up the glass and taking a drink. "Thanks."

She watched him, a dreamy smile on her face. "That was incredible, Anakin," she said.

"It was," he agreed. "Made me wonder how I lived five years without you. I don't know how I did it."

"Neither do I," Padmé agreed. She hesitated before saying what was on her mind, not quite sure how to put into words what it was she wanted to say. "So, what happens now, Anakin?"

He looked up at her. "You know what happens now, Padmé," he replied. "I will avenge us all by killing the emperor."

Padmé frowned, disturbed by the coldness of his tone. "Ani, do you think that's going to be easy? You know yourself how well guarded he is."

"I didn't say it was going to be easy," he replied. "But I won't let him get away with his treachery, Padmé. He will pay for it, I promise you."

"But at what cost?" she asked. "Is it worth risking your life over?"

"What would you have me do, Padmé?" he responded. "Just let him get away with all the lies? The betrayal? The atrocities? Surely you can't expect me to do that."

Padmé was troubled by the vehemence of his reaction. *Who are you, Ani?*

She was about to reply when Leia entered the room.

"I can't sleep," she declared, climbing up onto her father's lap.

“How hard did you try?” Padmé asked with a smile.

“I tried,” Leia replied. “I just can’t do it.”

Vader smiled. “I understand,” he said, stroking her dark hair softly. “I have trouble sleeping myself sometimes.”

Padmé was astonished by the transformation that the presence of his child had over her husband. Moments before Leia had arrived, he was full of anger, just thinking of Palpatine; and now, in Leia’s presence, his anger had evaporated. *They are they key*, Padmé thought. *Luke and Leia will be his way back...if only he will let them take him there.*

“Your whiskers tickle, Daddy,” Leia giggled as Vader kissed her cheek.

He smiled. “I guess it’s time for a shave,” he said, rubbing his chin.

“Obi-Wan’s whiskers are ticklish too,” Leia said.

Vader had to fight to keep his composure, the thought of Obi-Wan kissing his children more than he could bear to think of. He looked at Padmé, his eyes conveying his anger.

“So Obi-Wan has kissed you, has he Leia?” Vader asked, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

“Yes, lots of times,” Leia replied. “Dormé wishes he’d kiss her, but he doesn’t.”

That comment was all it took to shatter the ice that had formed over Vader’s heart at the mention of Kenobi’s name. “She does, does she?” he asked, a grin forming on his face.

“Uh huh,” Leia yawned. “She wants to marry him.”

Vader looked at Padmé, his amusement clear on his face. “How do you know that, Leia?” Padmé asked.

“She thinks about him *all* the time,” Leia replied. “Ask Luke.”

Padmé couldn’t help but laugh at her daughter’s comment. She’d suspected that Dormé was fond of the Jedi Master, but didn’t realize her feelings were of that nature.

“When is Obi-Wan coming to see us, Mommy?” Leia asked.

Padmé’s amusement soon disappeared. “He isn’t,” she replied. “Obi-Wan is not welcome in our house any more, Leia.”

“Because of what he did to you, Daddy?” Leia asked.

Vader nodded, not wishing to upset his child with his anger. “That’s right,” he said. “I’m afraid you won’t see Obi-Wan Kenobi ever again.” *Not so long as I live*, he thought resolutely.

“I think it’s time for bed,” Padmé said, standing up. “Come along,” she added, holding her hand out to Leia.

“Can I just visit with Daddy a little longer?” Leia pleaded.

“I’ll take her up, Padmé,” Vader told her.

“Very well,” she said. “I’m going up now. Don’t be long,” she said.

“I won’t,” he replied.

Padmé left the room, concerned and yet amazed by the inconsistencies that existed within her husband. Now that he looked like Anakin Skywalker again, it was easy to forget that he was still Darth Vader in many ways. *Too many ways...* she thought anxiously. *There is so much darkness in him still... will he ever be able to eradicate it completely?*

“Dormé will be disappointed I’m afraid,” Vader told his daughter.

“She doesn’t like you, Daddy,” Leia told him. “I don’t know why.”

Vader frowned. “Yes I know she doesn’t,” he replied. “You must learn how to block out the thoughts of others, little one,” he told her gently.

“How do I do that?” she asked.

“I will teach you,” he said, standing up and picking her up in the process. “There is much I want to teach you and Luke. You are special, you know that don’t you? You and your brother have special abilities, abilities that will make you powerful some day.”

“What do you mean, Daddy?” Leia asked as he started up the stairs with her.

“You will understand when you are older, little one,” he told her with a smile as he entered the room where Luke was sound asleep. “Now it is time for you to go to sleep.”

“I’m not tired,” she protested half-heartedly.

Vader merely smiled as he lay her down on her bed. “Yes, I know,” he replied, indulging her. “But your brother is asleep, I’m going to sleep, your mother is asleep; there’s no one to play with.”

“Okay, I guess I will go to sleep too then,” Leia relented at last, stifling a yawn. Vader grinned and pulled the covers up over her. He bent down and kissed her cheek tenderly. ‘Good night my lady,’ he said. “Sleep well.”

Vader left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. He walked down the hallway to the bedroom he shared with his wife. Taking a moment to take off his shirt and trousers, he climbed into bed, moving over to where his wife was, wrapping an arm around her.

Padmé turned to him, not quite asleep yet. “Ani?” she murmured sleepily.

“Did I wake you?” he asked, running his hand up her arm slowly.

“No,” she said. “I was just starting to drift. Did you get Leia down?”

“Well, she’s in her bed,” he told her. “But I think she’ll be asleep soon enough.”

“I hope so,” she replied.

“Did you know that Dormé had a thing for Obi-Wan?” he asked her.

“I had my suspicions,” Padmé told him. “I’m sure he has no clue.”

“No, probably not,” he replied. “I just hope that her affection for him didn’t cause her to do something foolish.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like telling him where you are,” he replied, “or contacting him since coming here. I don’t need to tell you how I’d feel about him showing up here.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “I don’t want to see him any more than you do, Anakin. I don’t think she told him, she hasn’t said anything about him since she arrived here.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Padmé,” he told her, running his fingers through her hair. “If she knows how you feel about him, she wouldn’t tell you, would she?”

“No, I don’t suppose she would,” Padmé conceded. ‘Let’s not worry about that, Ani,’ she said, reaching out to caress his face gently. “You’ve been so moody this evening, let it go. Please? Can you do that for me?”

Vader smiled. “For you? Yes, I can do anything Padmé.”

“I hope you mean that, Anakin,” she said. “You’ve come too far to slip back into the Darkness again.”

Vader did not respond, not knowing what he could say to reassure her, not wanting to lie to her. “I... I don’t want to be that person again, Padmé,” he told her, admitting it for the first time, even to himself. “When I think of the things I’ve done...” he stopped as images of the younglings he slew jumping to his mind. “There is so much blood on my hands... I don’t know how I can ever put that behind me. I’m not the man that I was, Padmé; how can I ever be that man again, after everything that I’ve done?”

Padmé could hear the pain in his voice, the shame; and it gave her hope. If he felt guilty for what he had done, then he was on his way back. No Sith would feel guilt, no matter what he had done.

“You’re already that man, Anakin,” she told him, caressing his face with her hands. “Can’t you see that? When you are with Luke and Leia, there is no trace of Darth Vader within you. Your love for them destroys every hint of the dark side that you still possess. Haven’t you noticed that? Can you honestly tell me that you felt like Darth Vader this afternoon when you were splashing those two? Would a Sith take such delight in playing with his children?”

Vader considered her words, allowed himself to consider them. Was the joy he felt when he was with his children part of the dark side? Was the bliss he felt in his wife’s arms part of it? The dark side knew nothing of love; it was the very antithesis of love. *So how could the dark side still hold a part of my soul if I feel so much love for this family of mine?*

“No,” he said at last. “A Sith knows nothing of love. But...”

“Listen to me,” she said, laying a finger over his lips. ‘I believe in you, Anakin,’ she told him. “With all my heart I do. Do you know what I told Obi-Wan after the twins were born? Before he told me that you had died?”

Vader simply shook his head.

“I told him that I knew there was still good in you,” she replied. “Even after what you did on Mustafar, I could still feel it. Perhaps that is why he lied to me, perhaps he was afraid that my belief in you would make me try to find you, and it would have, had I known you were alive. But that’s not what I’m trying to get at right now. The point I’m trying to make is that

you never completely succumbed to the darkness, Anakin. There was always still a small part of Anakin Skywalker in you, even in your darkest time. That spark, that ember of him is growing, and I see it more every day. And if you are truthful to yourself, you will admit that you feel it more every day too.”

Padmé’s words were provocative, and they forced Vader to look deep within himself. It had been so long since he had considered himself Anakin Skywalker that he had almost forgotten what it felt like to be him. Yet, she was right; when he was with his family, he was Anakin Skywalker. Claiming the right to call them his family meant acknowledging the existence of that man he had denied for five years. But she had never denied his existence; even after the atrocities he had committed, even after he had nearly killed her in his jealous, insane rage— she had still seen that man in him. She still loved him, and that alone was astonishing to him.

“Padmé,” he said at last, “I... I’m so confused. I don’t know who I am anymore. All I know is that you and the children have given meaning back to my life, have given me a reason to live again. Without you, I would have nothing, I would be nothing.”

“But you have us,” she reminded him. “You will always have us, Anakin. We belong together, and nothing will separate us again. Let us help you, let me help you. I don’t want you to go through this alone, not like before. I’m strong enough to help you through this, Ani. Please let me.”

Anakin smiled at her, the emotions he felt preventing him from speaking. Instead he merely pulled her into his arms and held her close, knowing that words were not needed between them. She was a part of him, as he was a part of her; neither of them complete without the other. Padmé smiled as she nestled up close to him, feeling as though her beloved Anakin had taken one step closer to the light.

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Night has fallen as we ascend the enormous staircase that leads to the Jedi Temple. Behind me I hear the footfalls of a thousand boots upon the concrete, the night air bristling with the awesome, lethal power embodied in their white armored bodies.

Blaster fire sings through the air, felling all in its path, we step over the bodies, not slowing for a moment, pushing through, ignoring the screams of outrage and pain that assault our ears.

The Council Chamber is dark, but I know they are here. As they sense my presence they creep out from behind the council chairs, tiny, terrified and confused.

“Master Skywalker, there are so many of them!” one youngling tells me, his eyes wide with fear. “What should we do?” I respond with a slice of my lightsaber... looking down at the dead youngling, I see the face of my son...

Padmé woke up to the sound of her husband’s shouts of agony. She sat up at once, and reached over to him.

“Anakin, wake up!!” she cried, shaking him on the shoulder. “Wake up!”

Anakin’s eyes snapped open and he stared wild eyed around him, the images from his dream still filling his mind.

“Ani, it’s okay, you were dreaming,” she said, turning his face to hers. “It was just a dream.” She was alarmed to see that he was trembling.

He looked at her, forcing the horrifying apparitions from his mind. “Padmé,” he stammered. “What have I done?”

Padmé frowned, not understanding what he meant. “Anakin, wake up,” she told him, thinking he was still half asleep. “You were dreaming.”

Anakin shook his head, as hot tears started forth and rolled down his face. “No, it was no dream,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “The younglings... I killed them, Padmé...so many of them... some of them younger than our twins... I murdered them!!”

“Ani,” she said, torn between the shock and horror of his actions and the heartbreak she felt for him as the guilt and shame of his actions overwhelmed him. Compassion won over, and she pulled him close to her as he wept. *It’s begun*, she realized. *His redemption has begun*. There would be many moments like this, when the realization of all that he had done crashed over him, as the goodness that was fighting for supremacy suffered the shame of it. *And I will be there to help him through each of those moments*, Padmé vowed as she held him close, stroking his short hair, whispering words of comfort. *I will be his life line through this, and I will not let him suffer it alone.*

Anakin managed to drift back to sleep after a while, though it was a restless, fitful sleep. Visions of the younglings did not return, for which he was grateful; but his sleep was interrupted by the unsettled mind of one of his children. He sat up, focusing his mind on them, knowing for certain that one of them was having a nightmare. Quietly he climbed out of the bed, not disturbing Padmé, and left the room. He crept down the corridor quietly until he reached the twins' room. *It's Luke*, he realized as he stood at the door for a moment.

Opening the door silently, he headed for Luke's bed, and, sure enough, saw that his son was tossing and turning in the throes of a nightmare. Sitting down on the edge of his bed, he took Luke by the shoulders. "Wake up, Luke," he whispered. "You're having a nightmare, wake up."

Luke opened his eyes and looked around for a moment, and then up at his father. "Daddy?" he said, his voice trembling with fear.

"It's okay Luke," Anakin said, pulling Luke up into his embrace. "You're safe."

Luke wrapped his arms around his father's neck tightly, taking comfort in his strong, reassuring presence.

Anakin stroked his son's hair gently, feeling utterly connected with his small son. *Padmé is right... these precious little ones are the way back.*

"Daddy, will you stay with me?" Luke asked.

"Of course I will, Luke," Anakin replied. "I'll stay as long as you need me to." He brought his feet up onto the bed and pulled the covers over himself and his son. Luke nestled up against his father, as Anakin wrapped one powerful arm around him protectively.

"Good night Daddy," Luke yawned.

"Good night Luke," Anakin replied, kissing the top of the boy's head. "Sweet dreams." Luke was asleep again within minutes, his small body pressed up against his father's side. Anakin closed his eyes, trying to relax in the small bed. He had barely closed his eyes for a moment when he heard his daughter's small voice beside him.

"Daddy, can I sleep with you too?" she asked.

Anakin smiled. "Of course," he replied, holding out his hand to her. She climbed into the bed, nestling into the crook of his arm. Anakin folded his arm over her, kissing the top of her head.

"Thanks Daddy," Leia said sleepily. "Good night."

"Good night my lady," he said. "Sleep well."

Padmé woke up alone the next morning. She sat up; alarmed that Anakin was not in the room. *He must be in the fresher*, she realized, getting out of the bed. She opened the door to the bedroom, and saw the door to the fresher was open, and that the room was empty. *Where could he be?* She wondered. And then she heard voices coming from the room down the corridor, the room where the twins slept. As she walked closer to the room, she heard the distinctive sound of giggling, and smiled as she realized where Anakin was.

Opening the door to the twins' room, she laughed when she saw the scene before her. Anakin was sitting on Luke's bed, holding each of the twins at arms' length as they tried to reach him in an effort to tickle his bare abdomen. Anakin looked up when he noticed the door open and smiled when he saw Padmé standing there.

"They're ganging up on me," he said with a smile, using the Force to hold each of the children just out of reach.

Padmé laughed, watching as the twins struggled to reach their father, giggling furiously as their arms swung wildly in front of them.

"Now, is that fair?" Padmé asked with a smile as she sat on the bed beside Anakin. "Two against one?"

"Yes, 'cause he's so big and we're so small," Leia declared.

Anakin laughed, and relented at last, releasing the twins who immediately attacked him, sending him onto his back as they assaulted his ribcage with their tiny hands, tickling him furiously. Anakin's laughter turned hysterical as the twins continued their attack, causing tears to spring to his eyes.

Padmé watched the three of them, her heart full. *This is Anakin Skywalker*, she reflected. *Right now, Darth Vader doesn't exist. Right now the Darkness has no sway over him.*

"Okay, okay, I surrender!" Anakin cried at last. "You win!!"

Luke and Leia cheered their victory, but it was short lived as their father came back at them, grabbing each of them around the waist and picking them up easily, one under each arm.

"What do you think, Padmé?" he asked as the twins kicked and flailed about to be let loose. "Maybe a good spanking to teach them some respect?" he said with a wink.

Padmé nodded, folding her arms over her chest. "Yes, I think that's a fine idea," she said. "Or at least a good tickling," she added, reaching out and tickling each of the twins on the belly as they squirmed and squealed in their father's arms.

"Okay, I think that's enough," Padmé said as Anakin set the twins down. "How does breakfast sound to everyone?"

"Good!" Leia shouted, seconded by her brother. The two of them raced out of the room, followed by their parents at a much more leisurely pace.

Dormé was downstairs setting the table for breakfast when the twins came barreling into the room. "Slow down you two," she chided. "Where's the fire?"

Luke and Leia looked at her, and then at one another, and started giggling all over again.

Dormé shook her head, lost as usual, and continued setting the table. "Sit down," she said. "Breakfast is all ready."

The twins sat down beside one another just as Anakin and Padmé entered the room, hand in hand.

“Good morning,” Dormé said to them, trying not to look at the open front of Anakin’s sleep shirt.

“Good morning,” Padmé said as Anakin pulled out chair for her. He bent down and kissed her on the cheek as Dormé watched. Anakin could sense Dormé’s jealousy, and it amused him. He looked at her and smiled, causing her to turn away and leave the room.

“So what shall we do today?” Anakin asked the twins.

Planet Alderaan

“Your Excellency, there is a message here from a Master Jedi Neeja Halcyon.”

Bail Organa set his cup of tea down and sat at the comm. screen in his office. He activated the screen and played back the message.

Greetings your Excellency. I hope this morning finds you well. I have wonderful news; Anakin has returned to Delaya a new man. The surgery was a complete success and he is recovering rapidly. Not only that, I strong feel that he is abandoning the Dark Side, something I have felt from our initial meeting on Garos IV. I truly believe that in time he will become Anakin Skywalker in every way once again; being with his family will help him in this metamorphosis. It is time for me to leave Delaya— Master Yoda must be told of all that has happened, for I feel that our destinies are linked to Anakin’s, and that he will be key in the resurgence of the Jedi Order in the months to come. He will need our help to destroy the Sith Lord, Sidious, and this is why I must see Master Yoda. I realize that I am once again impinging upon your generosity, Viceroy, but if you could provide me once again with transport, I would be most grateful. I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience. With this, the Jedi Master bowed respectfully and his image faded out.

Organa considered the words of Halcyon, whose judgment he valued highly. If he believed that Anakin Skywalker was indeed on the road back to the light, then it must be true. Revealing the whereabouts of Master Yoda was chancy, but if Halcyon believed they could trust Skywalker, then that was good enough for him. Besides, if he could help destroy the despot Palpatine, he would do whatever he could to do so, and gladly.

Organa made up his mind, and sent a return message to Delaya. It was short and to the point. *Be ready first thing tomorrow morning to leave Delaya. May the Force be with you.*

Planet Delaya

“Please take a deep breath, Lord Vader,” Two-Four-Bee asked.

Anakin did so, still marveling at how wonderful it felt to breathe on his own again.

“Excellent,” the droid responded. “One more should do it.”

Anakin complied as the droid watched the readout on its computer screen.

“Well?” he asked.

“Your lungs are functioning remarkably well,” it told him. “As is your heart. Truly, you have made an extraordinary recovery, Lord Vader.”

“Two-Four-Bee, don’t call me that,” Anakin said. “I’m not Lord Vader anymore.”

The droid stopped what it was doing to look up at its patient. "I don't understand, sir," it replied. "That is the designation you have been using since you first arrived at Polis Massa. Why would you change it? It is not logical."

"Never mind the why," Anakin said, putting his shirt back on. "Just don't do it anymore. My name is Anakin Skywalker, that's the name I want to be called."

"As you wish my lord," the droid replied.

Anakin shook his head as he stood up. "So I'm good to go?" he asked as he buttoned up his shirt.

"You are functioning within expected perimeters," the droid replied.

"That's good, right?" Anakin said with a smile.

"Yes, that is good," it replied.

"That's all I needed to hear," he said and then left the room, leaving a rather bewildered droid to question the illogic of the human species.

"Well?" Padmé asked him as he met her in the corridor.

"I'm in great shape," he told her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Remarkable I believe was the word used."

"Well I could have told you that," she said with a smile.

Anakin smiled. "It feels so good to be alive, Padmé," he said. "And I have you to thank for it. If you hadn't done the research on this incredible procedure, I'd have spent the rest of my life in that mask. How will I ever be able to thank you?"

"You don't need to thank me, Anakin," she replied, taking his face in her hands. "Having you back in my life, seeing you with our children is all the thanks I need."

"Well, perhaps there is some way I can show you my gratitude," he said with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I'm sure you can think of a way," she replied as he bent to kiss her.

Planet Alderaan

Obi-Wan Kenobi finally found his way to the royal palace. *Now to get in*, he thought, checking out the formidable looking gate at the entrance to the property. *I've come this far, I'm not going to stop now.*

"Stop, state your business here."

Kenobi looked at the guards calmly, reaching out with the Force to manipulate the minds of the two men. "I am expected by the Viceroy," he said smoothly. "You'd be wise to show me in right away."

The guards looked at one another, neither of them realizing that they had just been bamboozled by the strangely dressed man in front of them.

"This way," one of them said, falling into step beside the Jedi Master.

Kenobi merely smiled under his hood. *Bail won't let me down... he is the last link to Padmé and the twins. With any luck, I'll reach Delaya in 24 hours, maybe less.*

The guards showed Kenobi into the palace and up a flight of stairs to the office of the Viceroy. No one was inside, and the viceroy's assistant was not to be found.

"Wait here," the guard instructed the Jedi Master. "I will inquire about the Viceroy's whereabouts."

Kenobi merely nodded as he took a seat, his hands buried deep inside his sleeves. He felt confident, smug even, about the Herculean effort it took to get this far. *Only one more trip and I will be with them.* He felt certain that Padmé would have cooled off by now, and be only too happy to see him. *She needs me, perhaps now she realizes just how much, perhaps now she will understand how foolish she was to try to look for a human being under the mask of Darth Vader.*

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Planet Alderaan

“Obi-Wan! What are you doing here?” Bail Organa asked.

Obi-Wan stood up to meet the Viceroy. “I’m here for your help, Bail,” he said. “I have spent the past several weeks traveling across the quadrant, and I have one more voyage to make. That is why I am here—I need you to help me get to Delaya.”

Delaya?? How did he know?

“What takes you there?” Organa asked, keeping his exterior as calm as possible.

Obi-Wan studied the viceroy closely. *Your thoughts betray you, Bail*, he thought. “I think you know,” he replied simply. “I know Padmé and the twins are there. I am sure she has been quite anxious there all this time, alone. I am going to keep my promise.”

“What promise would that be?” Organa asked, unnerved by the irony of the situation.

“I promised to watch over Padmé and her children,” Kenobi explained. “She left Hannas II hurriedly, and in a fit of anger. I was afraid she would go to Vader, but I suppose she came to her senses before she did something utterly foolhardy.”

Organa watched the Jedi Master, struck by his arrogance. “What makes you think you know anything, Obi-Wan?” he asked pointedly.

Obi-Wan smiled. “A letter from an... admirer,” he replied. “Miss Dormé left me word informing me that Padmé and the twins were under your protection on the planet Delaya. I realize that you have not returned to the capital because of the obligation you feel you owe to her,” he continued. “But now that I am here, you can rest assured that I will resume that responsibility.”

Organa did not know how to respond. If he told him the truth, that Padmé was not in need of his or any one else’s protection, he would ask why. And if he found out the reason, a confrontation between them would be inevitable. Such a confrontation would be disastrous, for as far as Vader had come, he still harbored a great deal of resentment and anger where Obi-Wan Kenobi was concerned. Such a confrontation right now could set him back, sending him spiraling down into the darkness once again. *Somehow I have to keep him from going to Delaya... somehow I have to prevent the two of them from coming face to face... but how?* And then he had an idea.

“Padmé and the twins are no longer on Delaya,” Organa began. “They were, you’re right; but just last week Padmé took the twins to Naboo. She is staying with her parents there, so you see, Obi-Wan; there is no need for you to worry about protecting her. She is well protected, that I promise you.” *At least that much is true.*

Obi-Wan watched the Viceroy closely, clearly seeing the deception in his explanation. He was lying, that much was obvious; the question was, why? Why was he lying? Had someone got to him? Had someone threatened him? There was one name that kept popping up in Organa's mind, one that he did not utter: *Vader*.

"Curious," Kenobi said, folding his arms over his chest. "I would think that Padmé would know better than to travel to a planet that is so closely tied to her. Not if she is trying to hide."

Damn, Organa thought. *I didn't think of that*. "Well you know how stubborn Senator Amidala can be," he replied. "She insisted upon it. Once she found out that Vader was dead, there was no stopping her."

"So she knows then?" Kenobi asked, going along with the ruse, letting Organa hang himself with his own rope. "How did she learn of that?"

"I told her," Organa said. "I thought she ought to know."

Kenobi nodded, more convinced than ever that Vader was at the center of this web of lies. "I see," he replied. "And how did she take the news?"

Organa shrugged. "Well, I suppose she was somewhat relieved, but saddened all the same."

"Of course," Kenobi replied. "Well, it seems I've come a long way for nothing," he said.

"Sorry Obi-Wan," Organa said, smiling with relief. "I can arrange for transport back to Hannas II if you wish."

Kenobi bowed to him. "Thank you Viceroy," he said. "That would be most kind of you."

Planet Delaya

"Good morning Mommy! Good morning Daddy!"

Padmé opened her eyes to see Leia and Luke standing beside the bed. She smiled and shook the heavy arm that was draped across her. "Wake up, Ani," she said. "We have visitors."

Anakin opened his eyes slowly and, seeing his children, smiled.

"Good morning," he said, removing his arm from his wife's body. "How did everyone sleep?"

"Good!" Leia said, as she and Luke climbed into bed with their parents. Snuggling down between Padmé and Anakin, Luke and Leia giggled as they pulled the covers up under their chins.

Anakin looked over at his wife, amused by the twins' antics. *So much for spontaneity*, he thought to himself.

"We're having a visitor today," Padmé told the children. "Viceroy Organa is coming to see us this morning."

"I wish Master Nejaa wasn't leaving," Luke said. "I like him."

"Master Nejaa will be back," Anakin replied. "I promise you."

Padmé looked over at him. “Oh?” she asked. “How do you know that?”

“He said as much,” Anakin replied. “I think he has appointed himself my personal watchdog,” he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “Well I think it’s wonderful that you and he are getting on so well,” she said. “Almost like old times, isn’t it?”

Anakin nodded. “Almost,” he agreed, a frown forming on his brow as the thought of Obi-Wan jumped to mind. “It’s nice to know not everyone has written me off completely.”

Padmé knew who he was referring to: Obi-Wan. “No one will be able to deny the changes in you, Anakin— no one. Not even Obi-Wan.”

“I have my doubts about that,” Anakin replied. “Kenobi has never been open-minded. He sees things as black and white, always has. No doubt he tried to talk you out of coming to me once you learned the truth.”

“Yes, he did,” Padmé acknowledged. “He told me that you were incapable of loving me or the children; but I knew he was wrong, and told him so. He has no idea where we are, Ani, so you needn’t worry about that.”

“Kenobi is very resourceful,” Anakin reminded her. “If he wanted to find you, he would do so.”

Padmé frowned, the thought of another confrontation between Anakin and Obi-Wan unnerving her. “I hope not,” she said quietly. “I can’t imagine what would happen between the two of you should you meet again.”

Anakin looked at her. “I think you know what would happen,” he replied.

“Daddy, why did Obi-Wan hurt you?” Leia asked.

Anakin looked down at her, and then up at his wife. *How do I answer that one?* He wondered.

“Obi-Wan and your father had an argument,” Padmé tried to explain. “And things became... violent.”

Luke looked at his father. “You miss him, don’t you Daddy?”

Anakin looked down at this son, startled by his words. “Why would you think that?” he asked.

“Because thinking of him hurts you,” Luke replied. “You’re angry at him, but you miss him too.”

“I do not miss him, Luke,” Anakin replied quietly. “I never want to see him again.”

Luke could not reconcile the feelings he sensed from his father with his words— they didn’t match.

“Obi-Wan and I were once friends,” Anakin explained to his son, sensing his confusion. “Very good friends. But that all changed.” He did not want to go into the details about what

had transpired on Mustafar; the horror of what had happened on that day was too intense for his young children.

Padmé could sense that Anakin was becoming uneasy discussing Kenobi with his children. “Come on kids,” she said, climbing out of bed. “Time to get up and have breakfast. Viceroy Organa will be here soon.”

Luke and Leia followed their mother out of the bed.

“Are you coming Daddy?” Leia asked, turning back to her father.

Anakin nodded, pushing the dark thoughts of revenge from his mind. “Yes my lady, I’m coming,” he said.

Nejaa was already up and meditating outside when Anakin joined him on the patio, a cup of caff in his hand.

“Good morning, Anakin,” Nejaa said, opening his eyes to watch the young man approaching him.

“Good morning Nejaa,” Anakin responded. “I suppose you’ll be on your way soon.”

Nejaa nodded. “I will,” he replied. “I am most anxious to relate to Master Yoda all that has transpired. It is beyond even his precognitive abilities, this redemption of yours.”

“Well, I don’t suppose too many people held out much hope for me, Master,” Anakin said. “Including myself.”

Nejaa smiled. “Well, no one took into account the power of love, Anakin. The love you have for your family has been your road to redemption.”

“It makes you wonder doesn’t it?” Anakin commented. “Perhaps emotional attachments have some merit after all.”

“They do indeed,” Nejaa concurred. “You have proven that. Of course, not everyone is remarkable as your wife. She has stuck by your side through all of this, not every one would.”

“I know that,” Anakin replied. ‘Padmé is an extraordinary woman, and I count myself extremely blessed to have her in my life. Not to mention our children,’ he added, smiling at the thought of them. “I can’t explain it, Nejaa; when I am with them, every dark impulse, every shred of anger evaporates. Even before this miraculous physical transformation, even when I was still Darth Vader in every sense of the word, when I was with them, the Darkness just seemed to...disappear.”

“Of course,” Nejaa replied. “Love is the opposite of hate, Anakin. They cannot co-exist.”

“No, I suppose not,” Anakin replied. “So when can we expect you back on Delaya?”

Nejaa sighed. “Well, I suppose that depends on what Master Yoda has to say about all this. I imagine at some point he will want to see you for himself, to see for himself that you have truly changed.”

“I understand,” Anakin replied. “I will miss you, Nejaa. You’ve been a good friend through all this.”

Nejaa smiled. "It has been an honor to be a part of this metamorphosis of yours, Anakin. Besides, your children are remarkable. I enjoyed every moment I spent with them."

Anakin smiled, his paternal pride shining through. "Yes, they are aren't they? I suppose they are the living proof that there is some good in me."

Nejaa put his hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Don't ever doubt that, Anakin," he said. "There is a great deal of good in you. You are the Chosen One, and perhaps the fate of the Chosen One is to struggle with Darkness before realizing his ultimate destiny."

"Perhaps," Anakin said. "But I have renounced the Dark Side now, Nejaa; I will not let it take me from my family again."

"I know you won't, Anakin," he replied. "I have faith in you. The moment you spared my life back on Garos IV, I knew that you had changed. And each day since then I have seen more of the young man I knew and less of the Dark Lord of the Sith."

"I mean to destroy the Sith, Nejaa," Anakin said, his eyes following the progression of a bird as it skimmed across the surface of the lake in the distance. "That is my destiny, I know it now."

"And we will help you destroy him, Anakin," Nejaa said. "You can count on that."

As Anakin watched the distance, he saw the Viceroy's ship descending over the forest. "Looks like Organa is here," he said. "Guess this is goodbye."

Nejaa nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Come in and say goodbye to the kids," Anakin said. "They will miss you if you don't."

Nejaa smiled. "I wouldn't think of leaving without saying goodbye to them."

The two men walked into the house as the ship made its landing on the platform hidden deep in the Delayan forest. Bail Organa descended the ramp first, along with his personal guard, Captain Antilles. They were met by two security men at the foot of the ramp and escorted through the forest towards the house.

After they disappeared into the foliage, a third passenger descended the ramp, one whose presence on board had gone undetected. After a quick look around his surroundings, Obi-Wan Kenobi put up his hood and headed toward the path that led into the dense forest.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

"Welcome Bail," Padmé said as she and Anakin greeted him on the patio behind the house.

"Thank you, Padmé," he said, staring at Anakin. 'I can't believe it,' he said. "You look... well, you look like you did five years ago!"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it's a miracle," he replied. "I can still hardly believe it myself."

"I hope this will help you become the man you were then," Organa said. "Not just in appearance."

"He already is that man," Padmé said, looking up at Anakin with adoration.

Anakin looked down at her with a smile. "Well, I'm almost there," he said. "Thanks to my family."

Organa nodded. "You're a lucky man to have such a family," he told Anakin. "I hope you realize that."

Anakin nodded. "I do, believe me," he said, putting his arm around his wife. "I do."

"There is something we need to discuss," Organa said, his face becoming serious. "I'm afraid it isn't good news."

Padmé looked up at Anakin fearfully and then back at Organa. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's Kenobi," Organa said. "He's on Alderaan. He knows you're here, Padmé."

Anakin felt the anger surge through him. "What??" he demanded. "How?? How did he know?"

"Apparently your handmaiden left him a message when she left Hannas II," Organa explained, "telling him that Padmé and the twins were here under my protection."

Padmé felt herself grow tense with anger at this revelation. *She has never said a word about that message! Were you just counting on this to happen, Dormé?* "I can't believe she has done this," Padmé said at last, her voice edged with anger. "And has never had the courage to tell me!"

"No wonder she feels such animosity towards me," Anakin remarked. "She's an ally of Kenobi's. She may have been contacting him all the time we were away, Padmé! Who knows? She may have sent him the very coordinates to this house, just hoping he'd come here for another shot at me."

"Kenobi thinks you're dead, Anakin," Organa told him. "I guess he bought the news like everyone else. But as for Padmé, I'm not so sure he believed what I told him."

"What did you tell him?" Anakin asked.

"I told him that Padmé had been here, but that she was no longer," Organa explained. "But I'm afraid I'm not a very good liar— I told him that she had gone to Naboo, which, of course, would be far too dangerous for her, and he knows it."

"Do you think he will come here?" Padmé asked.

"I don't know," Organa admitted. "But I thought you needed to be warned all the same."

"He will do well to stay away from my family," Anakin said. "I will not stand for him interfering in the lives of my children and my wife any more."

"And what will you do if he does show up?" Organa asked.

Anakin looked down at Padmé. "I will do what I must," he said simply.

Luke and Leia came racing out of the house at this point, and headed straight for their father.

"Come on Daddy," Leia said, pulling on his hand. "You said you'd come for a walk in the forest with us today, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," Anakin said. "But not just now, Leia."

"But Daddy," Leia whined, putting out her bottom lip petulantly. "You promised!"

"Leia, Daddy needs to speak to Viceroy Organa," Padmé explained gently. "You can go for a walk later on."

"But Mommy," Leia complained. "I..."

"Leia, stop," Anakin said to her, turning to the forest. He stared at the foliage, a stirring in the Force causing the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end. 'He's here,' he said, a frown forming on his brow. "He's coming."

"Who is coming, Daddy?" Leia asked, confused by her father's seemingly irrational behavior.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," Anakin said, not taking his eyes from the forest, knowing that somewhere within its dense foliage his former master was making his way towards them. He turned back to this wife. "Let's get the kids inside," he said, taking them each by the hand.

Padmé nodded and they hurried the children into the house, along with Organa and Nejaa.

"How can you be so sure he's here?" Organa asked as they entered the house. "He had no transportation."

"That hasn't stopped him before," Anakin remarked with a frown. 'He is quite clever at making himself scarce when he needs to.' He looked at Nejaa. "You've sensed his presence, haven't you?"

Halcyon nodded. "I'm afraid so," he said. "He is here, no doubt of it."

Anakin stood for a moment and then headed upstairs.

"Where are you going?" Padmé called after him. He did not reply, but appeared moments later, carrying his lightsaber in his hand.

“Oh Ani,” Padmé said, looking at the lethal weapon in his hand. “You don’t think it will come to this, do you?”

“I don’t know, Padmé,” he replied. “But given the way things ended the last time we met, it’s a logical precaution to take. Besides, if what Bail has said is true, he’s not expecting to see me here. No doubt I will be the last person he wants to see.”

“Don’t let your anger from the past make you do something rash, Anakin,” Halcyon warned. “This is a test, Anakin, don’t you see that? If you let your anger dictate your actions, you will undo all the progress you’ve made over the past weeks.”

Anakin looked at the Jedi Master, conflicting emotions surging through him. *I won’t let the Dark side take me again... I won’t let it win... but neither will I let Obi-Wan Kenobi barge his way into my family’s life again... he has done enough damage, he has told enough lies...*

“Obi-Wan is the one who has forced this confrontation, Nejaa,” he said at last. “Not me. He will be the one to be tested, not I.”

Nejaa frowned, seeing the truth of Anakin’s words. *Obi-Wan don’t be a fool... don’t let your pride prevent you from doing the right thing.*

Anakin looked up, as though hearing something outside. “He is here,” he said, his grip on his lightsaber tightening. He walked toward the door and then turned and looked back at his family. ‘Stay here, all of you,’ he said. “This is between him and me.” And then he turned and left again.

Padmé ran over to the door and watched as Anakin strode towards the forest, the fear and anxiety welling up within her. *Please don’t let this be the undoing of him... please don’t let his anger cause him to slip back into Darkness...*

Anakin stopped when he heard the sound of footfalls upon the forest floor. Holding his unlit lightsaber in his hand, he could feel every muscle of his body tense in anticipation of the confrontation at hand. His heart pounded within him, his mouth was dry as each sense was heightened in anticipation. Finally, Obi-Wan emerged from the forest.

“So, we meet again, Obi-Wan,” Anakin said, pacing back and forth like a caged animal, fighting to control his rage.

Obi—Wan stood looking in shock at Anakin, hardly able to believe his eyes.

“Don’t recognize me, my old master?” Anakin asked. “I suppose I look rather different from the last time you saw me,” he added coldly.

“Yes, you do,” acknowledged Obi-Wan. “But I still sense that the change is only skin deep, Vader.”

Anakin frowned with a shake of his head. “You still think you know everything, don’t you Obi-Wan?” he said. “Never willing to admit you were wrong, are you? Even when faced with your own blatant lies, like the one you told Padmé five years ago.”

“What did you expect me to tell her?” Kenobi countered. “After you attacked her on Mustafar, she needed to be protected from you and your emperor, and telling her you were dead was the best way to do that. I vowed never to let you hurt her again after that day, Vader.”

“Padmé is my wife!” Anakin retorted angrily. “Luke and Leia are my children! We belong together; you had no right to interfere!”

“You forfeited all rights to those precious children as well as your wife when you tried to kill them!” Kenobi countered.

Anger surged through Anakin at the sanctimonious attitude of his former master and friend. “You may not be one to forgive, but Padmé is. And she has forgiven me. She loves me, Obi-Wan, and we are going to raise our family together, with or without your blessing.”

“I don’t know what sort of lies you’ve told your wife, but I refuse to believe that being with you is what is best for her,” Kenobi retorted. “She is blinded by her love for you, and I for one will not stand by and allow you to take advantage of that love. She is misguided and vulnerable, and you, like a true Sith, have swooped down upon her and manipulated her into thinking that you love her and the children, when you and I both know that no Sith is capable of loving anyone or anything but power!”

“Silence!!” Anakin shouted, his lightsaber springing to life, despite his best efforts to keep his anger at bay. “You will be silent! You know nothing about us, nothing!”

Kenobi raised his own weapon to meet that of Anakin’s. “No, Vader, I know all too well about you,” he said. “You see, I have been with Padmé all this time, I know what losing the man she loved did to her, and I will not allow it to happen all over again. Nor will I allow you to destroy those beautiful children with your twisted notions.”

Anakin lunged furiously at Kenobi, the anger surging through him. “You will not come near my children again!!” he roared.

The two blades flashed furiously, crashing against one another, as the two former brothers continued the battles that had started five years earlier on Mustafar.

Padmé watched in horror as the battle heated up, feeling helpless to do anything to stop it. She felt a tugging on her sleeve and looked down to see Luke standing beside her.

“Luke, go play with your sister,” she said, returning her attention to the duel outside.

“Leia isn’t here, Mommy,” Luke said. “She’s gone outside.”

“What!?” Padmé cried. Without a moment’s hesitation, she opened the door and rushed outside, followed immediately by Nejaa.

“Do your children know about how you’ve spent the past five years, Vader?” Kenobi asked as they stared at one another across their locked blades. “Do they know about the younglings at the Jedi Temple?”

“That was in the past!” Anakin shouted. “I’ve changed! I love my children, and they love me!”

“If you’ve changed, then why is your blade still red?” Kenobi counted, pushing against Anakin’s saber. The two stood at one another for a moment, trying to catch their breath.

“Daddy?”

Anakin whirled around at the sound of his daughter's voice, horrified to find her so close to the battle. "Daddy..." she said as the tears filled her eyes.

The look of fear in his child's eyes melted his heart, and he reached his hand out to her.

"Don't touch that child!" Kenobi shouted, leaping into the air and delivering a kick directly to Anakin's chest.

"ANAKIN!" Padmé screamed as he staggered back. She ran to him, as Leia started to cry.

"Leave him alone!!" Padmé screamed at Obi-Wan. "Didn't I tell you to leave us alone!!"

"Padmé, don't you see?" Kenobi said, "You're letting him manipulate you! He..." Kenobi stopped when he saw Anakin fighting for breath.

"Ani," Padmé said, putting an arm around his waist. His knees buckled as he felt the world start spinning around him. "Ani!!" she cried, alarmed as he fell to his knees, his breathing becoming erratic as he struggled for air.

"Leia, get Two-Four-Bee, hurry!!" Padmé cried as Leia ran into the house.

"Anakin, what is it? What's wrong?" Padmé asked anxiously as she took his face in her hands.

Anakin looked up at her, rubbing his chest as the pain in it worsened, as it became tightness. *Something is wrong... very wrong.* "I... I don't know," he gasped. "It hurts when I breathe... it... feels so tight..."

Padmé looked up at Obi-Wan, her dark eyes full of anger. "What have you done!?" she cried furiously. "What have you done to him??"

Bail Organa, along with the children and Two-Four-Bee hurried outside and over to Anakin who was rapidly becoming weaker.

"What is wrong??" Padmé asked the droid. "Why can't he breathe properly??"

The medidroid performed a quick examination of Anakin. "This is not good," it pronounced portentously. "We must get him to a medical facility immediately."

"Why? What is wrong?" Padmé asked in alarm.

"He has a Tension Pneumothorax to his left lung which is progressing to a Hemothorax," the droid reported.

"And that means?" Nejaa asked.

"It means one of his lungs has been damaged," the droid reported. 'And if we do not get him to the center at Polis Massa his heart will also become damaged,' he continued ominously. "He needs immediate treatment, far beyond what I am equipped to provide."

Padmé looked at Nejaa, her eyes wide with terror. "Oh gods," she gasped. 'Anakin!' she looked at him as he continued to weaken. "The medical capsule," she remembered. "Get it! We have to hurry!"

Organa and the droid hurried away to fetch the medical capsule as Luke and Leia approached their father with Nejaa. Anakin was lying down by now, weakening rapidly as he

fought to remain conscious. When he saw the twins, he tried to smile at them, but was unable to manage it. He looked up at Nejaa, motioning for him to come close.

“Nejaa,” he said softly, his voice barely audible. “If... if something happens to me... take care of my family...”

Nejaa nodded, too upset to speak. He looked up at Obi-Wan, who could only stand by and watch numbly to the crisis as it unfolded.

“Don’t talk that way, Anakin,” Padmé said, cradling him in her arms. ‘You’re going to be fine!’ she looked up desperately at Nejaa as though looking for his confirmation. “He’s going to be fine!”

Anakin looked up at his wife, wishing he would reassure her. He looked at his children, telling them without words how much he loved them. Luke and Leia came closer and embraced him, too frightened for words.

Finally Anakin looked at Obi-Wan, and saw in his former master’s eyes the realization of what he had done. *What have I done?* Obi-Wan thought in agony as he watched Anakin’s strength ebb, as he felt the love for his family filling him even as his strength waned. *Forgive me, my brother. I was wrong.*

Anakin closed his eyes, surrounded by his family, feeling their love wash over him. He didn’t even know it when they placed him in the medical capsule, and by the time they left Delaya, he had been placed in stasis by the medidroid in order to sustain him for the trip to Polis Massa.

Padmé and the twins sat at his side, the three of them silent as they held one another for support. Nejaa stayed close by as well, desperately worried, but offering his support to Padmé in her time of need.

As for Obi-Wan, he too had come along, despite Padmé’s vehement protestations. Nejaa had managed to convince her, and in the interest of saving time, Padmé had given in. She refused to speak to him, however; nor even to look at him, and Obi-Wan could feel the depth of her anger, of her resentment towards him. *Not that I can blame her*, he thought miserably. *I didn’t even let him explain... I didn’t even listen to him... what kind of a Jedi am I?* He berated himself as he struggled to come to grips with the shame and guilt of what he had done. All he could hope for now was that they reached Polis Massa before it was too late to save Anakin. *Don’t give up now, Anakin*, Obi-Wan thought. *You’ve come too far to give up now.*

Obi-Wan looked up as Nejaa entered the hold.

“Any change?” he asked.

Nejaa nodded. “I’m afraid so,” he replied solemnly. “Anakin has gone into shock.”

Chapter 42

Chapter 42

Planet Delaya

Dormé wandered around the empty house alone, wringing her hands in despair and guilt. *What if he dies? What if they don't get there in time? It's my fault... Obi-Wan never would have found them if it weren't for me.*

Trying to put the situation out of her mind, she occupied herself with household chores. *Those twins certainly like to make a mess,* she reflected as she commenced picking up toys from the floor of their room. *I've never seen children with so many toys!* She thought, and then she remembered where they had all come from: their father. The twins loved their father; no, they *adored* him. *What will it do to them if he dies? What will it do to Padmé?*

Dormé sat on the edge of Leia's bed, her face in her hands as the last heated exchange she'd had with Padmé flashed through her mind...

"What's happening Padmé?"

"You have the audacity to ask me that? How long have you and Obi-Wan had this planned?"

"It was never planned, Padmé! How can you think such a thing?"

"Because you hate Anakin! Because you have never accepted him! I know of your infatuation with Kenobi, Dormé, I know that you and he have been against the idea of Anakin and I being reunited, and I know that either of you would do anything to see that it didn't happen— even killing Anakin!"

"Padmé, you're upset, you don't know what you're saying!"

"I know exactly what I'm saying!! May the Force help you both if anything happens to my Ani!"

"But..."

But Dormé's words were halted by a slap in the face before Padmé had bolted from the house to accompany her husband to Polis Massa.

"What have I done?" Dormé whispered as hot tears rolled down her face. "Oh gods, what have I done??"

Polis Massa

Dr. Rool was waiting with an emergency medical team on the landing platform when Bail Organa's ship arrived. The viceroy had notified the facility en route of the situation in order to expedite Anakin's care.

“What is his current condition?” Dr. Rool asked as the medical capsule containing Anakin’s unconscious body was brought into the facility.

“He has been in stasis since we left the Alderaan System, and went into hypovolemic shock two hours ago,” Two-Four-Bee replied. “Significant loss of function to the left lung due to a blunt chest trauma.”

Dr. Rool frowned, nodding her understanding. “Collapsed lung,” she said, reproaching herself for allowing him to leave the facility so soon. “Take him to the operating theatre at once,” she ordered the droids as she fell into step behind them.

“Dr. Rool!”

The physician turned to see Padmé approaching her with her twins in tow.

“Dr. Rool please tell me you can help him,” Padmé pleaded.

“I won’t know anything until I can examine him, Padmé,” she replied. “But you know that I will do everything I can.”

Padmé nodded, her tears starting again. She stopped and looked down at the twins. “It will be okay,” she told them. “Daddy is going to be fine.”

The twins knew how frightened their mother was, and sensed that things were far more serious than anyone was telling them.

“Mommy, why did Obi-Wan do that?” Leia asked, still stunned by the terrible scene she had witnessed. “Why did he hurt my daddy?”

Padmé was about to answer when she caught sight of Obi-Wan coming towards them.

“Perhaps you should ask him yourself,” she said, her dark eyes glaring angrily at him. “He can explain it to you, for I’m sure I can’t.”

Leia looked at Obi-Wan, her as yet unrefined Force senses telling her how despondent Kenobi was. He was filled with regret, with worry and guilt over what had happened. *Then why had he done it?* Leia wondered in confusion.

“I’m sorry, Leia,” Obi-Wan said simply. “I... I don’t know what else I can say.”

Padmé bit back a response and took Leia by the hand again. “Come with us, Leia.

Obi-Wan stopped and watched Padmé and her children hurry away down the corridor. He didn’t know what he could do to rectify the situation. *If Anakin should die, how will I ever be able to forgive myself? Padmé will hate me even more than she already does... and the twins will grow up resenting me.* The way Anakin’s daughter had looked at him just then unnerved him; there was no doubt that the Skywalker twins had inherited their father’s natural abilities to use the Force. What if the resentment they harbored turned them to the Dark Side? What if they felt compelled to avenge their father some day? What Dark Force would be unleashed upon the galaxy should the children of the Chosen One decide to follow the same dark path that had claimed their father? *I can’t let that happen...* Obi-Wan thought desperately. *The galaxy would not stand a chance against two Dark Skywalkers.*

“Mrs. Skywalker I’m afraid you’ll have to wait here,” Dr. Rool said as Anakin’s medical capsule was brought to the surgical wing. “We will keep you posted as best we can, but the sooner we attend to your husband, the greater the chance he has of surviving.”

Padmé nodded numbly, holding onto the twins’ hands tightly. She watched as Dr. Rool entered through the blast doors into the surgical wing. *Let him be alright... he has to be alright, he has to survive.*

“Perhaps the twins would like to come with me to find something to eat,” Organa said as he rejoined the twins and Padmé.

Padmé looked up at the viceroy, grateful for his presence. “Thank you, Bail,” she said. Then, looking down at the twins, she squatted to face them both. ‘Go with the viceroy.’ She told them. “I’ll be waiting right here.”

“Can we see Daddy when we come back?” Luke asked, not fully understanding the situation.

Padmé glanced up at Bail briefly before returning her attention to her son. “I hope so, Luke,” she said softly.

Luke sensed his mother’s great fear, and put his arms around her neck, hugging her tightly. “He’ll be okay, Mommy,” he said to her. “I know it.”

Padmé closed her eyes as they filled with tears, hoping against hope that her son’s words were the precognition of a Force sensitive and not merely the hopes of a five year old boy.

Standing up again, Padmé watched as the twins walked away with Organa. As they disappeared around the corner, Padmé saw Obi-Wan standing there, watching her. She turned away, the anger filling her just at the sight of him.

Obi-Wan could see the anger in the very set of her shoulders, feel it emanating from every pore of her body. But he had to try; he had to reach out to her, no matter how ugly a situation it promised to be.

“Padmé, may I speak with you?” Obi-Wan said as he stepped up to stand behind her.

Padmé did not turn to him, did not acknowledge his presence in the small waiting area at all. Obi-Wan stood patiently, feeling terribly uncomfortable in her icy presence.

“Padmé, I know what you are feeling,” he began. That got her attention.

She turned to him, her dark eyes full of anger. “Don’t you dare say that to me!” she spat. “How would you know what I am feeling?? You are incapable of it! You know nothing about real, human feelings, Obi-Wan! All you know is your precious Jedi Code! So don’t tell me you know what I am feeling,” she concluded, turning away from him.

Obi-Wan winced under her words, yet he knew that they were deserved. “I know how angry you are,” he began again, determined to get through to her. “And deservedly so. But Padmé, please... please hear me out.”

Padmé turned back to him, and saw Nejaa standing close by. He simply nodded at her, as though encouraging her to give Kenobi a chance to say his piece. Reluctantly she turned her eyes back to Kenobi, her face like stone.

"I want to begin by saying that I am sorry," Obi-Wan began. "I am sorry for lying to you five years ago, for not telling you sooner about what had happened on Mustafar. As I told you back on Hannas II, I only did so to protect you. I truly believed that if you knew Vader was alive that..."

"His name is Anakin," Padmé interjected angrily. "Anakin! You see? You are still calling him Vader. So nothing has changed. I don't think I want to hear any more of this, Obi-Wan. It was a mistake to even let you come here."

"But Padmé," he began, and then felt the hand of Nejaa upon his shoulder. He turned to face his fellow Jedi.

"Let her be, Obi-Wan," Nejaa advised. "She is not ready to listen to you. Can't you see that?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I suppose not," he said. "I'm just anxious to... to..."

"To be absolved?" Nejaa offered, studying Kenobi closely. "Because that isn't going to happen too easily I'm afraid."

"No, it isn't," Kenobi acknowledged, casting his eyes downward. 'I was wrong, Master Halcyon,' he said miserably. "I was wrong not to take Anakin at his word." He looked up again, and Nejaa could see in his eyes the pain and shame he was suffering. "I should have believed him," Kenobi continued. "I should have felt the truth in him; instead I was just too consumed with revenge, with proving that I was right. I have not behaved in a manner befitting a Jedi," he concluded, hanging his head once again.

Nejaa nodded. "No, you have not," he agreed. "You have acted more like a Sith in your lust for revenge, Obi-Wan. So what are you going to do to make up for this? How are you going to atone for this?"

"I don't know," Kenobi admitted miserably. "But I will do whatever it takes, Master. Halcyon. Whatever it takes."

Nejaa was about to respond when Dr. Rool emerged from the blast doors and approached Padmé. Nejaa hurried over to hear what she had to say.

"Dr. Rool, please tell us you have good news," Padmé said as Nejaa stood at her side, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

"Your husband is alive," Dr. Rool began. "The stasis sustained him and enabled him to survive the shock that ordinarily would have killed him."

"So you are going to be able to help him then?" Padmé asked hopefully.

"I hope so," the physician replied. "His lung has collapsed. The trauma he sustained to his chest caused an air leak to develop, which eventually caused the collapse. Ordinarily this condition is fatal, for it leads to, hypoxia, or decreased oxygen in the blood. It rapidly affects all systems, causing the lungs and heart to be in distress, and can lead to death if not treated immediately."

Padmé felt herself grow numb as she listened to the doctor's prognosis. "But... you've reached him in time, right?" she asked hopefully. "You can save him, can't you?"

“It is a rapidly progressing condition,” Dr. Rool explained patiently. “But I think we can intervene before it is too late. I have instructed the droids to prepare him for immediate surgery, Padmé. We will insert a tube through the chest wall between the ribs to remove the air completely. The chest tube is attached to a vacuum that slowly and continuously removes air from the chest cavity. This allows the lung to re-expand. As the lung heals and stops leaking air, the vacuum is turned down and then the chest tube is removed. Hospitalization is required for proper care of the chest tube and because several days may be required before the affected lung re-expands.”

Padmé listened in silent horror to the doctor’s description. *My poor Ani*, she thought, fighting to maintain her composure. “I understand,” she said. “How long will this procedure take?”

“Not long,” Dr. Rool assured her with a smile. “I’d better get back to him. We’ll keep you posted, Padmé. I promise.”

Padmé nodded and watched as the doctor walked away. She turned to Nejaa and finally, after being so strong for so long, broke down. Nejaa held her as she wept, the terror and despair pouring out of her in great racking sobs. The Jedi Master simply held her as she wept, trying his best to stay strong for her in her hour of need.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43

It had been several hours since arriving at Polis Massa. Luke and Leia were asleep, curled up on a sofa in the waiting room, blankets thrown over them. Bail Organa was nodding off in one of the chairs, Nejaa Halcyon was in deep meditation, which, Padmé suspected, was just another way of saying he was asleep.

Padmé, however, was unable to sleep, meditate or even sit for more than a few minutes. Her state of worry had her too agitated to do so. Instead she paced, much as she had done only a short time ago when she had been waiting for him to recover from his life altering surgery. *We left too soon... we should have listened to the doctors... if we had not left this never would have happened.*

Walking over to the sofa where the twins were asleep, she bent down and kissed them each on the cheek, and then pulled the blankets up over Luke's shoulders. She was grateful for the twins' ability to sleep, grateful that they were too young to realize how serious the situation was. If they knew the danger their father's life was in, they would be inconsolable. *At least they have been spared that much*, she thought, watching her children as they slept.

"Mrs. Skywalker?"

Padmé turned quickly to see Dr. Rool standing there still clad in her surgical garb.

"Dr. Rool," Padmé said, rushing over to her. "How is he? Is he okay? Did you get to him in time?"

"He's alive," Dr. Rool said, removing her surgical mask and cap. 'We have managed to remove the air in the pleural space,' she told Padmé. "And removed the danger of pneumomediastinum, or complications to his heart."

"Thank the gods for that," sighed Padmé. "So he's going to be okay, then?" she asked.

Dr. Rool did not reply at once, which alarmed Padmé immediately.

"Tell me Padmé," the physician said at last. "Did Anakin incur any head trauma during his fight? Any head injury at all?"

Padmé shook her head. "No, none at all," she replied. "Why do you ask? What is wrong?"

"Sit down, Padmé," Rool said.

Oh gods... something is wrong...something is very wrong... Padmé thought frantically as she sat down. Organa and Nejaa were now wide awake and listening to the physician as well.

"Your husband is stable, Padmé," Rool said at once, sensing Padmé's fear. "He is out of danger."

“Then what is it?” Padmé asked. “I know something is wrong, even though you haven’t said it yet.”

Rool sighed. “Well, he’s exhibiting some symptoms we cannot account for,” she replied. “Namely, he is completely unresponsive to stimuli. And considering he has suffered no head trauma, there doesn’t seem to be a reason for it.”

“What do you mean, unresponsive?” Padmé asked, her fear returning.

“I mean he’s in a coma,” Rool replied. “We are currently running tests to determine why, but considering he did not suffer any head trauma, I don’t think we need to worry about neurological damage.”

“Then what could be the reason for it?” asked Nejaa.

“Well, I have a theory,” Rool replied. “But until I have more information, I don’t feel quite right about discussing it yet. But the tests won’t take long; as soon as I know more, I will let you know.”

Padmé nodded, fighting to remain strong. “May I see him?” she asked softly.

Rool smiled. “Of course, come with me.”

Padmé looked back at the twins, who were still fast asleep.

“Don’t worry Padmé,” Organa told her. “We’ll stay with them.”

Padmé nodded and then turned back to accompany Dr. Rool into the surgical wing.

The two women walked through a set of security blast doors that lead to the surgical wing of the facility. Padmé felt her stomach tighten as they drew closer to where Anakin was being treated.

“The chest tube is still in place, just to prepare you,” Rool said as they entered the critical care unit.

Padmé nodded her understanding as she followed Rool into the room. Anakin was lying on a diagnostic bed. She felt her throat constrict as she saw him. He was so still, so lifeless, with a large tube inserted into his chest, marring the perfection of his newly made body.

“My poor Ani,” she whispered as she reached his bed. He looked peaceful, as though he was enjoying a deep sleep. She immediately went to touch him, but held back, and looked up at Dr. Rool as though asking for permission.

“It’s alright,” Rool said, “you can touch him. Talk to him, it will help him.”

“Really?” Padmé asked, looking back down at his face. “You think he can hear me?”

“Yes, on some level,” Rool explained. “Patients in this state of stasis are often brought around by the voice of a loved one; I’ve seen it happen many times. Excuse me for a moment, Padmé; I’m going to consult with the technicians on the results of the brain scan we did.”

Padmé nodded, not taking her eyes from Anakin’s face. She brought her hands up and framed his face, stroking his cheeks gently. “Ani, I’m here,” she said, determined to awaken him from his stasis. ‘I’m not going anywhere. The children are with me too, though they’re

asleep right now. We're all here for you, Anakin. Please come back to us soon,' she said, her voice faltering. Bending down to him she kissed him softly on the mouth. "I love you," she said. "Please come back to me."

"Good news, Padmé," Dr. Rool declared as she returned to Anakin's bedside.

Padmé straightened up and looked at her expectantly. "What is it?" she asked.

"The brain scans were negative for any abnormalities," Rool told her. "Meaning, there is no neurological damage, no brain damage."

Padmé smiled, relief filling her. She looked down at Anakin, feeling for the first time that everything just might be alright. "So why is he still unconscious then?" she asked.

"My theory is that the physical exertion during the light saber battle combined with the subsequent chest injury overwhelmed the regenerating process that his body was still undergoing," she explained. "Now his body has gone into its own natural state of stasis in order to give it the rest he needs in order to recover from the trauma it suffered."

Padmé nodded. "That makes perfect sense," she replied. She looked up at the physician. "If we'd only taken your advice and stayed longer, none of this would have happened," she said.

Rool smiled. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Padme," she said. "Your husband is not exactly an easy man to say no to."

Padme shook her head with a smile. "No, that's certainly true. So how long can we expect him to be in this... stasis?"

Rool shrugged. "I don't know," she replied. "There's no way of knowing, really. It could be hours, it could be days. He's in no danger though, Padmé. He's stable, and the injuries he incurred have been repaired. Just stay with him, talk to him, get his kids to talk to him. Eventually someone will manage to get through to him."

"Thank you Dr. Rool," Padmé said. "Once again we are in your debt."

"You're welcome," Rool replied, looking down at her patient. "He truly is a remarkable man though, isn't he?"

Padmé nodded with a smile. "Yes, he certainly is."

Chapter 44

Chapter 44

“Mommy, we had ice cream!” Leia announced as she and Luke came into the room. “Where is Daddy? Where...” she stopped when she saw her father lying still and quiet on the bed. She looked up at Padmé, her eyes wide with alarm. “What is wrong with Daddy??”

Padmé walked over to her children and knelt down before them. “Your daddy is going to be fine,” she told them gently, taking one of their hands in her. “He’s having a big sleep right now to give his body a chance to get strong again. But he’ll be fine, isn’t that right, Dr. Rool?”

Dr. Rool nodded. “That’s right,” she said, looking at the twins. “Your father just needs some rest, that’s all.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another, as though trying to decide if they believed what they were being told.

“Why does he need rest?” Luke asked at last.

Padmé and the physician exchanged a glance.

“Well,” Dr. Rool began. ‘It’s because your daddy had an accident,’ she explained gently. “He was in a fight, and he was hurt pretty badly. But he’s going to be okay.”

“Obi-Wan hurt him,” Leia said with a frown. “I saw him, he kicked Daddy. That was bad of him, wasn’t it Mommy?”

Padmé frowned. “Yes it was,” she said. “But the important thing is that Daddy is going to be fine, children. In fact, it would help him get better if you talked to him. Dr. Rool says that he can hear you, even though he is asleep.”

“Daddy can hear us all the time,” Luke stated matter-of-factly. “Even when we’re far apart.”

“Yes, I know Luke,” Padmé acknowledged with a smile. ‘Come on,’ she said, holding out her hands to them. “Let’s go talk to him.”

Luke and Leia held their mother’s hands as they approached their father’s bed. Padmé could feel their tiny hands tighten upon hers, and she knew that despite her reassurances, they were frightened. No doubt it was unnerving for them to see their normally exuberant and energetic father so quiet and still.

“Anakin, the twins are here,” Padmé said, showing by example how to talk to him as if he were awake. She looked down at them. ‘Go ahead,’ she told them gently. “It’s okay to touch him, you won’t hurt him.”

Luke reached out his hand first, and rested it gently upon his father’s hand. He studied Anakin’s face, almost as though in communication with him. The psychic bond between

Anakin and his children still astounded Padmé, and she almost envied him that ability to communicate with them on such an intimate level.

Leia held back, however, watching her fathers' face with a worried expression on her face.

"It's alright, Leia," Padmé encouraged her. "Go ahead. Daddy would like it if you talked to him."

Leia looked up at her mother, her dark eyes troubled. "Mommy, is it my fault that Daddy was hurt?" she asked.

Padmé felt her heart ache at the expression in her child's eyes as she asked the question. "Oh Leia," she said, hugging her tightly. "Of course not! Don't even think that! The only one to blame for this is Obi-Wan, Leia. You had nothing to do with it."

Leia nodded, tears spilling down on to her mother's shoulder. "I wish this had never happened," she said desolately. "I wish Daddy was awake and we were all back home."

Padmé closed her eyes against her own tears. "I know, Leia," she said gently. "But he will be awake soon, I promise, and then we can all go home. Don't worry, Leia, everything will be fine. Now come," she said, taking Leia by the hand. "It will help Daddy to wake up if he knows we are all here."

Leia wiped her eyes and nodded, looking up at her mother bravely. "Okay Mommy," she said. She let Padmé lead her over to the other side of Anakin's bed, across from where Luke stood. Leia looked at Anakin's face, and then tentatively reached her hand out to touch his face. Gently, lovingly she stroked his face, and soon she smiled. "His whiskers tickle," she told her mother.

Padmé smiled, relieved to see Leia's acceptance of the situation. "Yes, he'll need a shave when he wakes up," she said.

Leia nodded her head with a smile, and then returned her gaze to her father's face. "He's dreaming about you, Mommy," she said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know that?" Padmé asked in surprise.

Leia shrugged. "I just do," she said simply.

"He is," Luke agreed. "It's a happy dream, he's happy right now."

Padmé smiled, not doubting for a moment that her children were right. *Dream sweetly, Ani*, she thought as she reached over Leia to caress his face gently. *Dream sweetly and hurry home to us*. Padmé looked at Luke who was studying his father's face intently, almost as though in communication with him. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed someone standing at the observation window and looked up straight into the eyes of Obi-Wan Kenobi. Seeing him sent the smile from her face immediately, and filled her with fresh anger. *I never should have let him come here! He has no right to be here!*

"I'll be right back children," she said, and walked around Anakin's bed towards the door. Obi-Wan watched her approaching, but did not move from where he stood looking at Anakin with his children.

"I don't want you near my husband or my children," Padmé said to him when she reached the corridor. "I didn't want you here at all, but Nejaa somehow managed to convince me to let you come along. But that doesn't mean I have to let you near my family!"

Obi-Wan looked at her contritely. "Padmé, I know you are angry with me," he began, reciting the same litany he had recited so many times before. "But please, don't make me leave. I'm worried about Anakin, I..."

"Worried about him!" she cried indignantly. "Don't make me laugh, Obi-Wan! If you were so worried about him, why did you attack him as you did? Why didn't you listen to him when he told you he'd change? I heard what he said to you, I saw the whole thing. Do you honestly think I'd let my children near him if he was the monster you thought he was?? Would I have anything to do with him? How little you must think of me if you believe for a moment that I would place my children in jeopardy that way!"

"Padmé, I was wrong," Obi-Wan said simply. "I was wrong about him, what more can I say? I never expected that the man I fought on Mustafar could ever become the man I once called brother again. I was wrong not to listen to him, I was wrong not to give him a chance to speak before attacking him. I suppose I was just so afraid that he would hurt you and the children who I had sworn to protect that I acted without thinking, and for that I am truly and deeply sorry. I know my words mean little to you, but I felt compelled to tell you anyway."

Padmé could see how contrite Kenobi was, how much he regretted what had happened on Delaya; but she found it difficult to summon even a modicum of sympathy for him. *At least now he sees the truth*, she thought to herself. *At least now he understands*. "What do you want me to say, Obi-Wan?" she asked tiredly. "That I forgive you? That it's okay that you lied to me? What is it you want anyway?"

"I just want Anakin to be alright," Obi-Wan responded quietly. "I just want the chance to tell him how sorry I am, and how much I've missed him."

Despite herself, Padmé was touched by his words, by the sincerity behind them.

"He's in a coma," she told him. "But the doctors say he'll be alright."

Obi-Wan nodded his understanding. "Thank you for telling me, Padmé," he said. "I will leave you and your family in peace now," he added with a bow to her, and then he walked away.

Padmé watched him leave, confused and bewildered by the radical change in his attitude. *Are you sincere, Obi-Wan?* She couldn't help but wonder. *Or is this just another way of trying to manipulate me?* She wished she could believe him, wished that she knew for certain that he was telling her the truth, that his feelings were genuine; having him on their side once again would be a tremendous asset, especially if Anakin planned on confronting the emperor. But past experience had taught her all too well that Obi-Wan Kenobi was a master of manipulation. She wished that she possessed the same intuitive abilities her children did so that she could see the truth of it all; but she did not. All she could do was take him at his word, and hope that his word was sincere.

Padmé decided to put him out of her mind, at least for now, and returned to her family once again.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45

Dr. Rool had provided cots for Padmé and the children so that they could sleep in Anakin's room. Padmé had tried to sleep, but with little success. The regular visits from the medidroid who was monitoring Anakin's progress interrupted what little sleep she managed to get. Finally she decided to get up, finding it too frustrating to toss and turn on the narrow cot.

Padmé bent down to kiss each of the twins, pulling the blanket up on each of them. The conversation she'd had with Obi-Wan had occupied her mind greatly during the many wakeful moments during the night. She remembered how close he and Anakin had been at one time. They had been best friends, like brothers; how did it all go so wrong? Padmé realized that the same cancer that had infected her own relationship with Anakin had also been responsible for the destruction of his relationship with his best friend: Palpatine. *How long had he been filling Anakin's mind with lies?* She wondered as she walked over to Anakin's bedside. *How did you manage to destroy that trust?*

Padmé sat down in the chair beside Anakin's bed and took his hand in hers. She brought it to her mouth and kissed it tenderly. "I've always loved your hands, Ani," she told him. "So strong, but so gentle too," she mused with a smile. She looked at his face, so serene and peaceful in sleep. "Obi-Wan wants to see you, Ani," she told him. "I don't know what to do," she sighed, running a hand over her brow. "Part of me wants to believe him, to believe that he is sincerely sorry for what he has done. He seems to be very contrite; but I'm afraid to trust him again after everything that he has done." She paused, almost as though she was waiting for him to respond. Deep down inside, she knew that in order for Anakin to know true redemption, he must forgive his former master. *But how can I expect him to forgive Obi-Wan when I'm not even sure that I can?* "I wish I knew what you wanted me to do, Anakin," she said at last. "I wish I knew what was best."

She stood up and sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching up to run her fingers through Anakin's short spiky hair. "I miss you," she said softly. "I miss your laughter, and your smile. I miss feeling your arms around me late at night, and waking up to your kisses in the morning," she continued, feeling her emotions rising to the surface again. She watched his face closely for any sort of reaction, but of course, there was none. "What are you dreaming about?" she asked him. "I wish I could see into your mind like Luke and Leia can. They miss you too," she added. "Leia has been feeling badly for what happened, like it's her fault. I told her she was not to blame, but I'm not sure that she believes that. She is so sensitive, Ani, even though she acts like she isn't sometimes, she truly is. She reminds me so much of you," she said with a smile. "Maybe that's why she loves you so much."

Padmé sighed as a wave of fatigue washed over her. She laid her head down on the bed beside Anakin, her arm reaching over his chest. Eventually her eyes grew heavy, and she drifted off to sleep.

Nejaa Halcyon was walking through the corridor heading towards the intensive care unit when he came face to face with Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“Hello Obi-Wan,” Nejaa said. “Have you been in to see Anakin?”

“No, I have not,” Obi-Wan replied. “Padmé has made it very clear that she wants me nowhere near him or the children.”

Nejaa nodded thoughtfully. “Padmé is very angry,” he remarked. ‘Her loyalty to Anakin is unflagging, and her devotion to him is tremendous. You have to expect that she would be angry right now, Obi-Wan,’ he commented. “She has a lot of reason to be angry with you. After all, this is the second time you’ve tried to kill the man she loves.”

Obi-Wan frowned, wincing under his fellow Jedi’s words; but he couldn’t deny them. He had done his best to kill Anakin not once but twice now. On Mustafar it was a matter of survival; but the manner in which he left him there to burn had given the Jedi Master nightmares ever since. And now this.

“Yes, I know that,” Obi-Wan said at last. “I just hope that in time she will forgive me, as well as Anakin.”

“Anakin has come a long way since you saw him last, Obi-Wan,” Nejaa replied, folding his arms over his chest. “Since Padmé and the twins have come into his life, he’s a different man. He spared my life, and that happened mere days after he was reunited with Padmé, when he was still Darth Vader in every sense of the word.”

“He spared you? Darth Vader did that?” Kenobi asked in astonishment.

Nejaa nodded. “Yes, he did,” he replied. “He renounced the Emperor when he learned of his treachery, and has vowed to destroy him. Every day he grows closer to being the man he was, Obi-Wan. You should have listened to him when he tried to tell you that.”

“Yes, I realize that now,” Obi-Wan replied contritely. “I suppose I was just so afraid of Padmé and the twins being manipulated by him that I didn’t stop to consider that he may have changed. It seemed inconceivable that he could have.”

“Yes, I can understand how you’d feel that way,” Nejaa conceded. “But he has. Being with his family has brought him out of the Darkness. It makes me wonder if the Jedi Code forbidding emotional attachments was foolishness, considering the power of the love between Anakin and his family, and what that love has done to transform Darth Vader.”

“Something to mention to Master Yoda when we see him next,” Kenobi commented. “Does he know about this? About Anakin’s redemption?”

“No, I was on my way to Dagobah when this happened,” Nejaa explained. “However, given Master Yoda’s amazing insight, I wouldn’t be surprised if he has already sensed the shift.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, you could be right,” he said. ‘His insights are remarkable,’ he commented. And then a thought struck him. “Nejaa, if Yoda is capable of sensing the shift, wouldn’t Palpatine be as well?”

Nejaa frowned. “Palpatine thinks Vader is dead,” he said. “Just as everyone in the galaxy does.”

“Perhaps he believed that at first,” Obi-Wan pressed. “But Anakin’s Force signature is stronger than anyone’s, even Palpatine himself. Don’t you think it’s possible that he could

sense that he was in fact alive? And that he has abandoned the Dark Side?”

Nejaa considered Obi-Wan’s words for a moment, his frown deepening. “You could be right,” he said at last. “And if you are, then Palpatine will come looking for Anakin. And if he finds him...”

“He will find the twins,” Kenobi finished. “We cannot let that happen, Nejaa. No matter what the cost, we must protect the twins from that fiend”

“Agreed,” Nejaa said. “I will go to Dagobah and consult with Master Yoda. Perhaps it is time we formulated a plan.”

“I think so,” Kenobi replied. “How will you get there?”

“The viceroy had agreed to provide me with transport,” Nejaa replied. “I’m certain that I can still count on him to do so.”

“Very good,” Obi-Wan replied. “I will stay here and let Padmé know where you have gone.”

“Don’t tell her what we suspect, Obi-Wan,” Nejaa cautioned. “Not yet. I don’t want her to be any more frightened than she already is.”

“Yes, good idea,” Kenobi replied. “Will you leave today?”

Nejaa nodded. “As soon as I can make the arrangements, yes,” he replied.

“Very well,” Kenobi replied. “Let’s go find Bail and tell him our plan.”

Padmé woke up a few hours later, feeling stiff and achy from the uncomfortable position she had fallen asleep in. She sat up, rubbing the small of her back as she did so. Looking at Anakin, she was disappointed to see that he had not moved at all since she had fallen asleep, and wore the same expression on his face as he had for more than twenty four hours now.

Padmé stood up and walked over to where the twins were still sleeping. *I wonder what time it is*, she wondered with a yawn. The sound of the door opening was heard, and she turned to see Dr. Rool entering the room.

“Good morning, Padmé,” the doctor greeted her. “Did you manage to get some sleep?”

“A little,” Padmé replied. “What time is it?”

“Just a little past 0800,” Rool replied as she walked over to Anakin’s bed. “No change?”

Padmé shook her head. “No, I’m afraid not,” she replied, her voice full of the disappointment she felt.

“Well, it’s only been twenty four hours,” Rool replied. “That’s not really so long.”

“It certainly feels like it,” Padmé replied. “How long do comas like this usually last?”

“There is no prescribed duration,” Rool replied. “Each case is different. Considering your husband’s excellent health and the fact that he’s young and strong, I don’t expect it will be too long.”

Padmé nodded, feeling hopeful at that doctor's words. "Do you think I could go and freshen up?" she asked. "I would really like a shower," she added.

Rool nodded. "Of course," she replied. "I've taken the liberty of putting some things for you and the children in the quarters you used when you were here last. Go right ahead, Padmé. I'll stay here with the children while you're gone."

Padmé smiled, grateful for the woman's compassion. "Thank you so much," she said. "You are very kind."

Dr. Rool smiled. "Not at all. I like to do what I can to make the waiting more bearable."

"I won't be long," Padmé said. She looked back once more at the twins, and then left the room as the doctor started her examination of the still sleeping Anakin.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

Padmé returned to Anakin's room to find the children awake and standing by their father's bedside with Dr. Rool. They looked over when they heard her enter the room.

"Mommy!" Leia said, coming over and giving her a hug, followed by Luke who did the same thing.

"Good morning," Padmé said, kissing each of them on the top of their head. "Did you have a nice sleep?"

"Yes we did," Luke told her. "Did you?"

"Well, it wasn't the best I've ever had," Padmé admitted. "How is Daddy this morning?" she asked, looking over at Dr. Rool.

"No change," the doctor replied. "His vitals are stable. Once he wakes up we will remove the chest tube. Hopefully that will be soon."

"Yes, we all hope for that," Padmé remarked, looking at Anakin.

"Mommy, we're hungry," Luke told his mother, tugging on her sleeve.

Padmé looked down at her son. "So am I," she told him with a smile. 'Let's go get something to eat.' She looked back up at Dr. Rool. "We'll be back in a while."

Dr. Rool nodded. "Have a good breakfast."

Nejaa and Obi-Wan had found Bail Organa in the facility's refectory and had explained their plan to him.

"If you're right about Palpatine, then we need to do everything we can to prevent him from finding Anakin and his family," Organa said at last. "I think involving Yoda at this point is a sound idea. What will you tell Padmé? Surely she will question why you are leaving at this point," he pointed out.

"She already knew that I planned to go to Dagobah," Nejaa reminded him. "She won't question that."

"Perhaps it would make more sense if I went to Dagobah," Obi-Wan said at this point. "After all, Padmé is rather upset with me right now. Wouldn't it be better if you were to stay here with her and the twins, Nejaa?"

Nejaa nodded. "It would be easier all around, no doubt," he conceded. 'But you and I both know that you need to make amends to Anakin,' he said. "You need to make peace with him, and with Padmé. Running away from the situation won't make it any easier to do that."

"I wouldn't exactly be running away," Obi-Wan retorted. "Just making things easier for Padmé."

Bail and Nejaa exchanged a look. "I have to say that I agree with Nejaa," Organa said. "If Anakin is to defeat the emperor, he will need you at his side, Obi-Wan. You and he need to patch things up, and you can't do that if you're on the other side of the galaxy."

Obi-Wan sighed, realizing that both men were right. "Yes, I suppose you're right," he conceded at last. "Although this isn't going to be pleasant, nor easy," he added.

"No one said it would be," Nejaa said. "But you must see how important it is that you take this step, Obi-Wan."

"Yes, I see it," Obi-Wan replied. "I only hope that Padmé allows me to take it."

Organa noticed Padmé and the twins entering the room. "She's here," he said, nodding in her direction.

Nejaa and Obi-Wan looked over to where he had indicated. "I will talk to her," Nejaa said. "Is it possible that we can leave today, viceroy?"

Organa stood up. "I'll make sure of it," he said.

Padmé had seen Obi-Wan talking with Organa and Nejaa, and had steered her children clear of them towards the other side of the room. Nejaa walked over to where she was sitting waiting for the droid to take her order. She looked up and smiled at him. "Hello Nejaa," she said.

"Good morning Padmé," he said. "Good morning children."

"Good morning Master Nejaa," the children said in unison.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"Of course," Padmé said.

"Thank you," Nejaa said, taking a seat. "Any change in Anakin's condition?"

"No," Padmé replied. "He's still asleep."

Nejaa nodded his understanding. "Padmé, I am going to Dagobah today," he told her. "Master Yoda needs to be told what has been happening."

"Yes, I realize that," she replied. "You don't think you can wait for Anakin to wake up? Dr. Rool assures me it will be any day now."

Nejaa hesitated before responding. "I am sure of that," he replied. "But it is quite urgent that I get to Yoda, Padmé. As you remember, I was about to leave when Obi-Wan showed up."

"Yes, I remember," she replied. "Why do I get the feeling there is more to this than you are telling me, Nejaa?"

Nejaa was surprised by her comment. *For someone who is not a Jedi, she does have remarkable insight.* He smiled. "Probably because there is more," he said. "I don't want to alarm you, Padmé," he began, "but Obi-Wan and I are concerned that Palpatine will be able to detect the shift in the Force that Anakin's redemption is creating."

While she didn't completely understand what he meant, Padmé understood enough to be alarmed by his words. "So you think he'll be able to figure out that Anakin is not dead?" she asked, trying to remain calm.

Nejaa nodded. "Yes, we think so."

"Anakin figured it would only be a matter of time before he was able to figure out the truth," she reflected. "So what should I do?"

"Stay here," Nejaa replied. "Nothing has happened yet, Padmé; we are simply trying to anticipate what will happen. Obi-Wan will be here, as well as the viceroy. You will be well protected."

"Yes, I'm sure," she replied. "Will you bring Yoda here?" she asked.

"That will be up to him," Nejaa replied. "Master Yoda is not one to be told what to do," he added with a smile.

"I see," Padmé replied as the droid approached their table to take their orders. She ordered breakfast for the children, but when it came to her turn, she realized that all of a sudden she was not very hungry.

"Good morning Padmé," Bail Organa said as he sat down with them. "Has Nejaa filled you in?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes he has."

"Well I'm afraid there's another situation I must deal with at once," Organa continued.

"What's wrong?" Padmé asked.

"When I reached the ship to talk to Captain Antilles, there was a message waiting for me from my assistant," he explained. 'It seems our illustrious emperor is planning on visiting Alderaan,' he continued. "I must get back at once. I cannot give him any reason to be suspicious."

"Quite right," Nejaa concurred. "Will you still be able to take me to Dagobah?"

Organa nodded. "Yes, I'll make sure Antilles takes you there right after he leaves me at Alderaan." He looked at Padmé. 'Don't worry, Padmé,' he said. "I'm leaving several security men here. I'll arrange for a ship to return here as well to bring you and your family home when Anakin is ready."

"Thank you," Padmé said, realizing that she would be alone with Obi-Wan now that Bail was leaving. *Great.*

"Where is Obi-Wan?" Organa asked.

Nejaa looked around the refectory. "I don't know," he said. "He was here a few moments ago."

Padmé looked around here, and then realized where he was. *He's gone to see Anakin.* "I know where he is," she said, standing up. "Children, stay here with Master Nejaa and the viceroy."

Nejaa and Organa watched as she hurried out of the room. “You don’t think he’d be foolish enough to go to see Anakin, do you?” Organa said.

“I’m afraid that’s exactly where he’s gone,” Nejaa replied, realizing that perhaps this was the confrontation that was needed in order to clear the air. ‘It will be alright, viceroy,’ he added, looking back at Organa. “Don’t worry.”

Organa wasn’t so sure, but he trusted the Jedi’s judgment nevertheless

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Obi-Wan Kenobi waited for Dr. Rool to leave the room before he entered. The medidroid did not seem to question his presence, so he approached Anakin's bed.

Standing at Anakin's side, he stared at him, still astonished by the remarkable metamorphosis he had undergone. The image of Anakin's mutilated, burning body had haunted Obi-Wan for five years. His dreams were often haunted with the sight of the yellow eyes full of pain and hatred, the sound of his screams of agony and his final words: ***I hate you!!*** Looking at him now, it seemed inconceivable that Anakin had ever undergone such a horrific ordeal; his face, his body were as they had been before Mustafar. And according to Nejaa Halcyon, he was close to being the man he was on the inside as well. That seemed even more incredible than the physical transformation to Kenobi, for he never in his wildest imaginings would have anticipated Anakin Skywalker being redeemed from the Darkness that he had embraced so whole-heartedly.

"Well, you are certainly looking well, Anakin," Obi-Wan said awkwardly, not really knowing what to say. 'I'm happy for you, Anakin. I... I felt very badly about what happened on Mustafar.' He stopped, realizing his words were woefully inadequate. "There really are no words to be said about what happened there, Anakin," he continued. "I only hope that in time we can get past it. Nejaa is convinced that you have changed, that you are on your way to redemption. I wish I had known that before....I wish that I had listened to you when you tried to tell me so."

Anakin, of course, was completely unresponsive to Kenobi's words. But that did not deter the Jedi Master. "Your children love you a great deal," he continued. "I envy you, Anakin— I envy you your beautiful family. I can see now that it is their love that has made the difference in your life, and i..."

"What are you doing in here?"

Kenobi turned around to see Padmé standing there staring at him, her dark eyes full of anger. "I asked you a question."

"I am simply speaking to him, Padmé," he replied calmly. "I meant no harm."

"I thought I told you that I didn't want you anywhere near him," Padmé said coldly. "You've done enough harm, Obi-Wan. I don't trust you near him anymore."

Her words stung him. Did she honestly think he would attack an unconscious man?

"Padmé, please..." he began.

"Leave, Obi-Wan," she said. "I don't want you near my husband, is that clear? Leave him alone, leave all of us alone!"

Obi-Wan frowned, frustrated with her stubbornness. It seemed that she was no where close to forgiving him, and he was beginning to wonder if she ever would be.

“Padmé, I understand that you are angry, but...”

“Angry?” she interjected. “That is an understatement, Obi-Wan. How do you expect me to feel? You don’t seem to get it, do you? I don’t want you in my life, or the life of my family, and that includes Anakin.”

“Padmé, whether you like it or not, Anakin’s redemption hinges on coming to terms with the past,” he told her, growing tired of her scorn. “If he is ever to become a Jedi again, he must get past Mustafar, and that means ridding himself of the animosity I know he feels towards me. If you truly want him to be redeemed, then you will help him instead of making it impossible for him.”

“Exactly what are you implying?” she demanded.

“I think you know,” he replied. “Forgiveness is required for him to be redeemed, and he will never find it in his heart to forgive me if you prevent it from happening.”

Padmé frowned, not liking his sanctimonious attitude. “Leave this room, Obi-Wan,” she said. “Leave before I say something truly regrettable.”

Obi-Wan decided he was getting no where, and so he decided to leave the room. *You will see reason eventually, Padmé*, he thought to himself as he left the room. *You will have no choice but to see reason. Anakin’s redemption depends upon it.*

Padmé stood watching him leave, her body trembling with anger. She was angry that he had disregarded her wishes that he stay away from Anakin, angry that he had dared to try and make her feel as though on some level she was actually hindering Anakin’s journey back from the Dark Side. But what made her most angry was the fact that he was right, and it irked her tremendously to acknowledge it. Forgiveness *was* the path to the light; if Anakin were to truly be redeemed, he would have to forgive Obi-Wan, there was no doubt of it.

Padmé walked over to where Anakin was sleeping, seemingly oblivious to what had just transpired. She stroked his face lightly, loving the rugged contours of his handsome face. “I don’t suppose we have much of a choice, do we Ani?” she said to him. “As much as I hate to admit it, Obi-Wan is right. We must forgive him if you are truly to know redemption.”

Outside the room, Obi-Wan smiled to himself, realizing that finally Padmé was coming around. He knew she would eventually, for despite her anger, Padmé was an intelligent woman, not one given to vindictiveness or spite. He had no doubt that she would do what was best for Anakin, even if that meant swallowing her anger and pride in order to forgive the unforgivable.

The galactic Emperor Palpatine did not enjoy traveling. In fact, he hated it. But there was something going on, something that smacked of treason, and he felt certain that the planet Alderaan was at the center of it. *Bail Organa was one of the traitors who had sided with Padmé Amidala*, he reflected as his Imperial Cruiser made its way to the Alderaan System. *No doubt he is involved with the Rebel Alliance, if only I could prove it.* Palpatine even had suspicions that Organa had been involved in the ambush that had killed Darth Vader several weeks earlier. His search for a new apprentice had not been a successful one; it seemed that

all the Force sensitive beings were either dead or in hiding since the Jedi Purges. *In time I will find a worthy apprentice*, he thought as he drummed his ancient fingers upon the armrest of his throne. *Although replacing Vader will be most difficult*. While he was incapable of mourning his young apprentice, he certainly felt his death keenly. Without Vader to keep the systems in line, he was being forced to rely more heavily on the bureaucracy. Palpatine hated bureaucrats, and had planned to dissolve the Imperial Senate completely once the Death Star was completed. But now that Vader was gone, that may not happen, nor would the Death Star be completed soon. Vader had been most effective at motivating those involved in its construction; now that he was gone, the task had fallen to Grand Moff Tarkin, a sleazy little man whom Palpatine hated intensely. Yet, he was good at what he did, and now that Vader was gone, he would be invaluable.

"Your majesty, we have made the jump to hyperspace," one of the red-robed guards informed Palpatine.

"Excellent," he said, leaning back into his throne. "Inform me when we reach the Alderaan System."

"Yes sire," the guard replied with a bow.

We'll see what you have been up to soon enough, Organa, he thought smugly. *And once I have the proof I need of your treachery, you will no longer be a thorn in my side*.

"Come on now children, it's time to get ready for sleeping," Padmé said. "You both need a bath tonight too."

Luke and Leia were reluctant to leave their father's side, and had spent most of the day with him. By now the wall beside his bed was festooned with drawings that the twins had made for him. Neither of the children was frightened or worried about their father's current state; they were able to communicate with him, even if no one else was. They knew it was only a matter of time before he woke up.

"Mommy, are we going home soon?" Luke asked as she was putting his pajamas on him later that evening.

"Well we need to wait for Daddy to wake up Luke," Padmé explained patiently. "You know that."

Luke nodded. "He will wake up tomorrow," he stated matter-of-factly. "He told us so."

Padmé was shocked by her son's words, and yet she did not doubt him. She looked over at Leia who was still in the tub. "Luke is right," Leia said as she dove into the water once again.

"I hope you're right, Luke," Padmé said.

Luke smiled. "He dreams about you all the time, Mommy," he told her.

Padmé smiled. "Does he?"

Luke nodded. "Yes, he really likes you," he said with a serious expression.

Padmé had to laugh. "That's nice to know," she said. "Now come on out of there, Leia," she said. "Time for bed."

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Planet Alderaan

Bail Organa arrived at Alderaan amidst a flurry of activity. It wasn't often that the Emperor paid a personal visit, and the staff of the royal household was busy making sure everything was prepared for his visit.

Organa fought the wave of panic that had started growing within him as soon as they had landed. He had done well to hide his innermost thoughts from Palpatine on many occasions; the location of the Rebel Alliance being the most vital piece of information that the emperor sought. Although not a Jedi, Organa did possess a superior intellect and a strong will; both had served him well to block the emperor's attempts to reach the inner sanctum of his thoughts. *They will be put to the test now*, he thought as he hurried from his personal landing platform towards the palace. *I will not betray Anakin or his family — he will learn nothing from me.*

"Bail! Thank the gods you're back!" Breha exclaimed when she saw him. She hugged him tightly. "Palpatine is on his way."

"I know," he told her, kissing her cheek. "That's why I've come back. Any idea when we can expect him?" he asked as they hurried inside.

"No, of course not. You know how he likes to take people by surprise," she remarked sourly.

"Yes, only too well," he muttered. "Come on Breha, let's get ready for this farce."

Polis Massa

Padmé had spent another restless night on the cot in Anakin's room. In her mind she kept hearing the conversations she'd had with Obi-Wan, with Nejaa, and with her own son. ***He will wake up tomorrow... he told us so.*** Padmé had never doubted her children's instincts, for they were so much like Anakin's, and Anakin was always right. *He will wake up tomorrow...* Padmé rolled over on the cot to look at Anakin on the other side of the room, still sleeping peacefully. *Let Luke be right*, she thought fervently. *Let it be so...* Forcing herself to relax, Padmé closed her eyes in an attempt to sleep, knowing that the ensuing days would undoubtedly be hectic ones.

Planet Dagobah

Nejaa Halcyon had always had an unnatural and very un-Jedi like fear of snakes. So when he found himself wandering through the swamps of Dagobah in search of Yoda, it took all his Jedi concentration not to lose his cool.

"Of all the planets in the galaxy, why did he have to choose this one?" he muttered as he trudged through the humid tangle of vines and branches.

“Because hidden from the Emperor’s sight, Dagobah is.”

Nejaa recognized the voice at once and looked up to see the diminutive Jedi Master sitting on a log, watching him with an amused expression on his face.

“Master Yoda,” Nejaa smiled. “It is good to see you.”

“Surprised I am to see you, Master Halcyon,” Yoda replied. “But a pleasant surprise it is. Come into my home and have something to eat.”

Nejaa was only too happy to follow Yoda out of the swamp and into a small hut where, he hoped, there would be no more snakes.

“News you have, Master Halcyon,” Yoda said as the two Jedi settled in with a bowl of exotic looking stew.

“Indeed I do, Master Yoda,” Nejaa replied, eying the unusual looking food. “It’s about Vader.”

Yoda nodded, almost as though he was expecting to hear Vader’s name. “I have sensed his death,” Yoda said.

“Vader is dead,” Nejaa confirmed. “That is true; but not in the way you think, Master Yoda. He has abandoned the Dark Side, he is Anakin Skywalker once again.”

“Most unexpected this is,” Yoda replied thoughtfully. “Seen him you have?”

Nejaa nodded. “Yes Master,” he replied. “He spared my life on Garos IV, and since then has been to Polis Massa to have his injuries repaired.”

“And what of his wife and children?” Yoda asked. “Do they know of this?”

“Yes, they are the reason he abandoned the dark side in the first place,” Nejaa replied. He then went on to relate to Yoda the remarkable details of Vader’s transformation and rebirth, ending with the fateful duel between he and Obi-Wan Kenobi on Delaya. Yoda listened in silence, nodding his ancient head from time to time.

“Obi-Wan and I are concerned that the emperor will learn the truth of Vader’s demise,” Nejaa concluded. “And if that happens, then the entire Skywalker family will be in danger.”

“Yes, the emperor will stop at nothing to find them,” Yoda agreed. “Stopped he must be, Nejaa. We must stop this from happening.”

Nejaa nodded. “Anakin means to destroy the emperor, Yoda,” he said. “And I think we need to help him. The four of us against the emperor will mean the end of the Sith.”

“Part of the prophecy, this is,” Yoda replied. “That the Chosen One will destroy the Sith, and with our help, destroy it he will.”

Polis Massa

Forty-eight hours had passed since Padmé and her family had arrived at Polis Massa: forty-eight hours of waiting, of hoping and praying. Anakin was still not awake, and it was beginning to seem as though Luke’s prediction was not going to happen. The boy however did not seem concerned, which puzzled Padmé. It was nearly evening, and no change or even

a sign of change had been noted in Anakin's condition. Still, Luke had never been wrong before, she reminded herself. Part of her didn't want to leave Anakin's room for supper, for if he were to awaken, she wanted to be there by his side when it happened. But the children were hungry, and she needed to eat, despite her lack of appetite; and so, reluctantly, she had taken the children to the refectory for their evening meal, leaving Anakin in the capable hands of the medidroids who were always close by.

Padmé had spoken very little to Obi-Wan in the past twenty-four hours; no more than absolutely necessary. His concern for Anakin was undeniable, however; even she had to admit, albeit begrudgingly, that he was truly worried about his former pupil.

"Mommy, when is Master Nejaa coming back?" Leia asked as they started to eat their meal.

"I'm not sure, Leia," Padmé replied truthfully. "He went to find Yoda, another Jedi Master."

"Is Yoda going to come here?" Luke asked.

"Perhaps," Padmé replied, not even certain herself. "We'll have to wait and see, won't we?"

"I saw Obi-Wan today," Luke said. "He looks sad, Mommy. I think he is sad about Daddy."

"He is sad about Daddy," Leia replied.

"Did he tell you that, Leia?" Padmé asked, keeping her tone nonchalant.

Leia shook her head as she took a drink of her milk. "No," she said. "I can just tell."

Padmé nodded, believing her daughter. Although the twins had manifested unusual abilities since they were infants, it seemed to Padmé that since they had been reunited with their father, those abilities had grown tremendously. Each day they seemed stronger, their abilities more refined. *They will be as powerful as their father one day*, she realized with mixed feelings.

"Let's eat, children," she said. "I want to get back to see your daddy."

"Me too," said Leia. "I hope he wakes up when we get back."

"So do I, Leia," Padmé replied.

Luke only nodded. He sensed his mother's unease and mistrust around Obi-Wan Kenobi, even though he didn't understand it. Given that, he decided it was probably best not to tell her where Obi-Wan was at that moment. *It will only make her upset*, he realized, and so he said nothing and continued to eat his meal.

Obi-Wan stood in the doorway of Anakin's room, his heart heavy. He was worried that if Anakin didn't wake up soon, it would be too late to protect the Skywalker family against the emperor. *I will not let Palpatine take you away from me again*, Kenobi thought, staring intently at the sleeping face of his one time pupil and friend. *I will not let him destroy you again*.

Kenobi walked into the room and stood beside Anakin's bed. "I wish you would wake up, Anakin," he said. "There is so much we need to talk about, so much we need to prepare for. I only hope that you will be able to forgive me for what happened.' He stopped, fighting against the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. "I can't tell you how many times I have had nightmares about that day, Anakin," he continued. "That horrible, horrible day on Mustafar five years ago. I have wondered if I should have walked away when I did, or if I should have done the humane thing and put you out of your misery... but I couldn't do it, Anakin, I just couldn't! You were my brother, Anakin, my best friend! If only I had been more attentive to what you were going through, if only I had seen what Palpatine was doing before it was too late. I failed you, Anakin," he said as the tears filled his eyes. "I failed you! I don't know if you can ever forgive me for that... or for what happened on Delaya. I don't know what possessed me," he admitted. "I heard you tell me that you had changed, but something in me refused to believe it. And when you reached out to Leia, all I could see was you reaching out to Padmé on Mustafar, and something inside me snapped."

He stopped again, struggling to maintain control of his emotions. "I've missed you, Anakin," he said at last, not caring that his tears were now rolling down his cheek. "I've missed you every day since Mustafar; but I never dreamed you would return to the light. And yet you have! And what is my reaction? Instead of embracing my long lost brother, I try to kill him....." he stopped and put his face in his hands, releasing the misery he had bottled up inside of him. Guilt, shame, grief, regret: all these emotions poured forth in a great catharsis that reduced the normally staid Jedi to a mass of tears.

"Will you stop the blubbering old man?"

Obi-Wan started at the sound of the voice, and looked up to see Anakin looking at him, a hint of amusement in his brilliant blue eyes.

"Anakin!" Kenobi exclaimed. "You're awake! You're...you're alright!"

Anakin looked around the room, discombobulated. "Where am I? Where's Padmé?"

"You're at the Polis Massa medical facility," Obi-Wan informed him. "You've been in a coma for two days. Padmé is..."

"A coma?" interjected Anakin. "Why? What happened?"

Kenobi was surprised by the questions. *Does he not remember the fight?* He wondered.

"Ani!" Padmé cried as she rushed into the room. "Ani, you're awake!"

Ignoring Kenobi completely, she ran to Anakin's bedside and threw her arms around him. "I've been so scared," she told him tearfully.

Anakin embraced his wife, still confused over what had happened to him.

"Padmé, why am I here?" he asked. "What happened to me?"

Padmé withdrew from their embrace and looked down at him. "What is the last thing you remember?" she asked.

Anakin thought for a moment, and then looked back at Obi-Wan. "We fought," he said, his eyes on Kenobi. "But after that..."

“Your left lung collapsed as result of that fight,” Padmé explained. “But we got you here in time, and you’re going to be just fine.”

Anakin frowned. “How did that happen?” he asked.

“A well placed kick,” Obi-Wan informed him. “I... I didn’t realize it would cause such damage, Anakin, truly. Had I known...” he sighed, running his hands through his hair anxiously. “If only I had known.”

“Daddy! Daddy!” cried Luke and Leia as they rushed into the room and straight to their father’s bed. Anakin smiled and opened his arms to his children. They came at him, one on each side, and threw their arms around his neck. Anakin held his children close, the love he felt from them washing over him.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin with his children, feeling the power of the bond between them, the strength of the love they shared. Padmé could see how surprised he was by the twins’ overt demonstration of love towards their father.

“Now do you believe that he has changed?” she asked him softly.

Obi-Wan looked at her and simply nodded. “I never would have believed it possible, Padmé,” he replied. “But yes, there is no doubt left in my mind. Anakin Skywalker has returned.”

Padmé smiled, feeling the resentment she’d carried around for weeks now start to fall away. “Yes, he has,” she agreed.

Luke looked up at his mother briefly. “I told you he’d wake up today,” he said with a smile, and then returned to his father’s embrace.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49

"It's good to see you awake, Lord Vader," Dr. Rool said as she entered the room, having been alerted by the medidroid in attendance.

Anakin looked over at her. "I'm not Lord Vader any more, Doctor," he replied. "I'm Anakin Skywalker now."

Dr. Rool raised her eyebrows. "Indeed? I'm very glad to hear it," she said with a smile. 'We need to remove your chest tube now,' she told him as she came over to stand beside his bed. "So we can get you up and moving about."

Anakin nodded. "Sounds good to me," he replied. He looked up at Padmé. "Maybe the children shouldn't be here for this," he told her.

Padmé nodded. "I was thinking the same thing," she replied. "I'll take them for a walk. We'll be back soon," she said, bending down to kiss him.

Anakin watched his wife and children leave the room and then turned his attention back to the physician.

"All set?" she said.

Anakin nodded.

"I'll need you to take a long, slow, deep breath as the droid withdraw the tube," she instructed. "It isn't pleasant; we can give you a local pain killer if you wish."

"Not necessary," Anakin replied. "Pain is relative, Doctor," he added wryly.

Rool nodded. "I understand. Okay, let's do this," she said, nodding to the medidroid. The droid watched Anakin as he drew a deep breath, and then drew the chest tube out in one pull. Anakin winced, but kept his concentration fixed on his breathing.

"Well done," Rool said as the droid proceeded to apply a bacta treatment and a dressing on the small wound left by the chest tube.

"When can I go home?" Anakin asked as he watched the droid.

"Not for at least twenty-four hours," Dr. Rool replied. "We need to run some scans, as well as some follow up examinations and scans regarding your organ and bone regeneration. After that, you'll be free to go, assuming all is well."

"Anakin never has been a terribly tolerant patient," Obi-Wan quipped with a smile.

Dr. Rool smiled. "Yes, I've noticed. Now let's get you up on your feet," she said.

Anakin nodded and slowly sat up, ignoring the dull ache he felt low in his chest. Using his hands to brace himself, he pushed himself off the bed. Obi-Wan stood before him, holding a

hand out to him for support. Anakin looked up at him, and then took his hand, allowing Obi-Wan to pull him to his feet.

"I'll go and get your family," Dr. Rool said. "don't over do it." She cautioned before she left the room.

Anakin walked slowly across the room, under the watchful eyes of his former master.

"It's good to see you up and about," Obi-Wan said as Anakin made his way back to the bed.

Anakin nodded. "I have to say I'm surprised to see you here," he said.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Padmé didn't want me to come, but Nejaa managed to talk her into it."

"I suppose so," Anakin replied. "So are you convinced that I have changed, Obi-Wan? Or do you still doubt me?"

"No, no more doubts," Obi-Wan replied. "I just wish I had listened to you when you tried to tell me on Delaya that you had changed."

"You never did listen to me," Anakin countered. "I suppose some things never change."

"Now that's not true, Anakin," Obi-Wan replied. "If anyone is the poor listener, it would have to be you."

Anakin raised his eyebrows. "Me?"

Obi-Wan folded his arms over his chest. "Yes, you," he insisted, enjoying the banter with his old friend. "You never listened, always figured you knew what was best, despite my advice."

"Well when your advice made no sense, can you blame me for not listening to it?" Anakin returned.

"Enough! You two should be ashamed of yourselves."

Both men turned to see the image of Qui-Gon Jinn in the room. "Is this any way for two old friends to behave?"

"I'm not old," Anakin replied with a smile.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Do you see the disrespect I have to put up with from this young one?" he asked Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon smiled. "Yes, reminds me of another young man I once knew," he commented.

Anakin laughed at the comment, and at the expression on Obi-Wan's face. He looked at his former master, seeing him with different eyes. *I've missed you, Obi-Wan*, he thought to himself, realizing what this change of heart meant: *the darkness is gone... I've passed the test.*

"It is good to see you again, Anakin," Qui-Gon said with a smile. "I always knew you would defeat the dark side."

Anakin smiled. "I'm grateful for your faith in me, Master," he replied. 'I have a lot to atone for, though,' he added. "There is so much blood on my hands. I'm not sure I will ever be able to make up for it."

"You know what you need to do, Anakin," Qui-Gon told him. "You know what your destiny is: to destroy the Sith. Your redemption is the first step towards that destiny."

"And I will be right there at your side to help you, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, "along with Nejaa and Yoda. Between the four of us, Sidious doesn't stand a chance."

Anakin nodded. "You're right," he replied. "He has spent the past five years trying to put an end to the Jedi; little does he know that it will be the Jedi that will spell his end."

Obi-Wan smiled grimly. "Indeed it will," he said. "Nejaa has gone to Dagobah to find Yoda. I expect they will return within a few days."

"Daddy!"

Anakin looked over to see his daughter run into the room. He opened his arms to her and picked her up in a huge embrace.

"I missed you, Daddy," she told him. "You were asleep for a long time!"

Anakin smiled at her. "I was," he agreed. "But I'm wide awake now, and hungry as a wookiee."

Leia giggled.

"That's good to hear," Dr. Rool said as she reentered the room with Padmé and Luke, who immediately ran over to his father. "You've been on an intravenous for forty-eight hours now; it's time for you to get some real food into your system. A man your size can't exist on synthesized nutrition for long."

"You'd be surprised," Anakin replied sardonically.

"Now you sit down," Padmé said, coming over to him and the children. "And we'll see to it that you have some real food to eat."

"Sounds good to me," Anakin said, smiling at his children.

"I'll see to it at once," Dr. Rool said. "Is there something you'd prefer?"

"Right now, just about anything sounds fantastic," Anakin replied.

Dr. Rool nodded. "Very well, I'll make sure it's high in calcium and protein— remember, you're still on a special diet."

"I remember," Anakin replied as Rool left the room.

"So, things are okay between the two of you?" Padmé asked, looking from Anakin to Obi-Wan.

The two men looked at one another. "Well Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked. "Are they?"

Anakin looked at his former teacher, looking inside his own heart at the same time. Where there had been hatred and anger only days earlier, now there was peace, acceptance, and

forgiveness. For the first time in five years he felt at peace, and knew that the forgiveness he had conferred upon Obi-Wan was the reason for that. His anger towards his one time friend had been the final obstacle in his redemption, and now that it was gone, so was the darkness that had possessed his soul for five years.

“Yes, they are,” Anakin said at last. “I have missed you, Obi-Wan,” he added with a smile.

Obi-Wan nodded, smiling in return. “I’ve missed you as well,” he replied. “It’s good to have you back.”

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

Planet Alderaan

“Welcome to Alderaan, your Majesty,” Bail Organa said with a flamboyant bow. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“Spare me your empty flattery, Senator,” Palpatine snapped. “I don’t think my visit should come as any surprise to you.”

Organa braced himself for the inevitable probing of his mind that normally took place during one of these visits. Palpatine was certain that Organa was involved with the Rebel Alliance, but was still unable to prove it. Despite numerous attempts, the emperor was unable to catch the viceroy in a compromising situation, or even find a hint of guilt in his mind or conscious. Organa’s ability to block his thoughts was formidable, and it would be put the test now, of that he was certain.

“I’d like to offer my condolences on the passing of your...associate, Lord Vader,” Organa said, ignoring the emperor’s petulance. “I’m certain his loss has been keenly felt by the Empire.”

Palpatine frowned, trying to detect any trace of duplicity in Organa’s words. But, as usual, he was a blank page.

“Lord Vader’s demise was indeed tragic,” Palpatine replied. “But he can be replaced.”

Organa nodded, inwardly repulsed by the coldness of the old man. “So what is the reason for your visit, sire?”

“I am here to give you a message,” Palpatine said. “A message that my negligent servant was supposed to give you, but he died before he had the chance,” he added sourly.

Organa frowned. “How inconsiderate of him,” he commented.

Palpatine ignored the remark and continued. “The message is a simple one: the Empire is watching you, Viceroy,” he said coldly. ‘I have no doubt of your involvement in the Rebel Alliance,’ he continued, watching Organa’s impassive expression for any sign of change. There was none, so he pressed on. “I have no evidence of this, or else we’d not be having this conversation; but make no mistake, you are being watched, Viceroy, and the minute that I...” Palpatine stopped, and Organa grew alarmed by the expression on the old man’s face.

“Are you ill, Your Majesty?” Organa asked, fearing the old man was suffering a heart attack.

Palpatine was not suffering a heart attack; he was shaken by a tremendous tremor in the Force. *Not, not a tremor... a rift... a shift... a rupture...* Palpatine held onto a nearby chair for support as the power of this cataclysm raged through him, his mind frantically trying to deterring from whence it came, and what it meant. No one had ever caused such a tremor, no

one except one man: Anakin Skywalker. *Skywalker... alive? How is this possible? How, unless...* and then it dawned on him. *You have betrayed me, my treacherous apprentice,* he thought irately. *You will not live to regret this, Vader!*

Without another word to the bewildered viceroy, Palpatine left the room and sent word to have his shuttle prepare to leave Alderaan at once.

“What was *that* all about?” Sala Dakwin, Organa’s assistant asked once the emperor had gone.

Organa frowned. “I think I need to get back to Polis Massa right away,” he said. “Make sure my ship is ready as soon as possible, Sala,” he said, leaving the room.

Sala stood and watched him leave, more confused now than ever.

Polis Massa

“So when can I go home?” Anakin asked as Dr. Rool concluded her scans.

Dr. Rool smiled. “Give me a chance to study these results,” she replied.

“I think you’re trying his patience,” Padmé said with a smile.

“I think so too,” Dr. Rool laughed. “But it cannot be helped, I’m afraid. I want to make sure he’s fine before sending him home. I’m sure you want that too.”

“Yes, we do, don’t we Anakin?” Padmé replied, looking at him pointedly.

Anakin sighed, looking down at his children. “I’m outnumbered again,” he said with a shrug. Luke and Leia simply giggled at their father.

Obi-Wan watched in amazement at the interaction Anakin had with his children. It was so natural, as though they had been together for the past five years. *Luke looks so much like his father,* he reflected, remembering Anakin the first time he had met him so long ago. He had been a mere nine years old, and yet he had already demonstrated tremendous Force abilities, much like his children were demonstrating. And Leia— even though she was the image of her mother, her personality was just like that of her father. It seemed both twins were a mixture of their parents, although both possessed their father’s incredible Force abilities. *If Palpatine were ever to discover their existence, it would be a disaster...*

“Alright you two, time to get ready for bed,” Padmé said. “Hopefully we’ll be going home in the morning, and I want you both having a good rest.”

“I should be able to let you know about that within the hour,” Dr. Rool told Padmé. “But I don’t anticipate any problems.”

“That’s good to hear,” Padmé replied, smiling at Anakin. “I’m going to get these two ready for bed, we’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” Anakin said. ‘I think I need to do some walking,’ he said, standing up. “I’ve been sitting on my behind too long.”

Padmé laughed. “Well, I’ll leave you in Obi-Wan’s hands then,” she replied. “I’m sure he will see to it that you don’t over do it.”

“You can count on that, Padmé,” Obi-Wan said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Yes, I’m sure she can.”

Padmé ushered the twins out of the room to go get ready for bed, followed by Dr. Rool on her way to her office to study the results of Anakin’s scans.

“Well Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “Shall we?”

“Lead the way,” Anakin replied.

“I’m rather surprised Bail Organa did not accompany Padmé when she brought me here,” Anakin remarked as he and Obi-Wan walked through the corridors. “He has been of tremendous help to us through all this.”

“He did,” Obi-Wan replied. “He was called back to Alderaan on pressing business.”

Anakin looked at his former master closely, knowing him well enough to realize that he was not telling him the whole story. “What sort of business?” he asked.

Obi-Wan sighed, not wanting to put stress on Anakin in his convalescence, but realizing that he needed to be informed of the situation. “Palpatine was coming to Alderaan,” he said simply.

Anakin frowned at the mention of that hated name. “Organa has always been successful at blocking the emperor,” he told Obi-Wan. “Much to Palpatine’s displeasure,” he added with a smile.

“Let us hope he can continue to block him,” Obi-Wan said. “I don’t need to tell you what would happen if he found out that you were alive,” he added.

Anakin shook his head. “No, you don’t,” he said. “Though in time he will know, Obi-Wan. A confrontation is forthcoming—you know that.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, I realize that,” he said. “And as I told you, I will be there at your side when it happens. But you are not ready for that yet, Anakin. You need more time to recover your strength. I think we both know now the risks of you engaging in a fight until you are fully healed.”

“Yes, we certainly do,” Anakin replied. “But I may not have that luxury, Obi-Wan. Palpatine will not be fooled forever, we both know that. We have to be prepared at any time for a confrontation.”

“I suppose so,” Obi-Wan conceded. “Anakin, have you considered that Palpatine may sense the twins Force signature? They are remarkably strong, even at their young age.”

“I have considered that,” Anakin replied. “That is why I placed a Force shield around them and Padmé when she first came to me.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan replied. “I imagine that must have been...surprising for you when she came to you with the twins.”

Anakin nodded. “Surprising is an understatement,” he replied. “I thought she was dead, Obi-Wan. Palpatine told me that I’d killed her.”

“What?” Obi-Wan asked in shock. “He told you that?”

“Yes,” Anakin replied, feeling the anger simmering within him just at the thought of that day. ‘I had just had surgery, if you can even call the butchering they did on me surgery,’ he added bitterly. “And I asked Palpatine where Padmé was, if she was alright. His response was that I had killed her. And, idiot that I was, I believed him. That was the final push, Obi-Wan, the final step. I knew nothing but darkness after that, for I believed that she was gone, and that I was responsible. When she appeared with our children, it was like a dream... some incredible, beautiful dream. And the fact that she wanted to be with me, even as I was, even when I was still Darth Vader, astonished me.”

“Padmé is a remarkable woman,” Obi-Wan remarked. “She was very angry with me when she learned the truth. There is no doubt in my mind that she would have sought you out five years ago had she known the truth.”

Anakin frowned. “Yes, she would have,” he agreed. “Sparing me five years of hell in the process.”

Obi-Wan winced under the comment. “I hope you can understand the reasons why I told Padmé what I did,” he said. “After Mustafar, I was afraid that you would harm her. Surely you can see why I felt that way.”

Anakin sighed. “Yes, I can,” he admitted. ‘I was such a fool, Obi-Wan,’ he said, shaking his head. “I believed him, I trusted him, and all along he was using me. He had no doubt planned everything down to the letter from the day he met me when I was a boy.”

“I’m sure of it,” Obi-Wan replied. “He recognized your abilities, just as Qui-Gon did. He arranged events in order to ensure that you needed him, Anakin. He probably knew that you and Padmé were married all along.”

“Probably,” Anakin concurred. “And of my nightmares of her death.”

“Nightmares?” Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes. Do you remember the day we returned to Coruscant after rescuing that bastard, Palpatine?”

“Yes, I remember,” Obi-Wan replied.

“That was the day Padmé told me that she was pregnant,” Anakin told him. “We had been married three years. She was terrified that we’d be discovered, but I was so excited, so happy at that thought of being a father. That very night, however, I dreamed of Padmé dying in childbirth. I couldn’t shake the images from my mind; and I became desperate to save her.”

“Anakin, I wish you had said something to me,” Obi-Wan put in at this point. “we were best friends— why didn’t you confide in me?”

“How could I?” Anakin returned. “If you knew that Padmé and I were married, you’d have been obligated to turn me in to the Council. I couldn’t tell anyone; and yet somehow Palpatine must have known. He knew how terrified I was, and that was how he lured me in. He told me that through the Dark Side of the Force I would be able to save the people I love from dying. I was so terrified of losing Padmé that I grasped at his story, his lies, as it turned

out, like a drowning man. Of course you know how it all turned out,” he concluded, turning his eyes downward as the shame and guilt of those dark days flooded him.

“Yes, I know,” Obi-Wan said. ‘I didn’t know any of this, Anakin,’ he said, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “It’s all so senseless, so tragic. If only I had known what you were going through.”

“But you didn’t,” Anakin said. ‘No one did, not even Padmé knew the extent of it. Only Palpatine knew— and he used that knowledge to destroy me,’ he stopped, shaking his head. “When I think of what I did, Obi-Wan... I have nightmares about the younglings, and sometimes I see my own children’s face among them,” he said.

“That is natural, Anakin,” Obi— Wan said gently. “You have rejected the Darkness; the good man in you has to come to terms with all that you did when you immersed in that Darkness.”

“I know that,” Anakin replied quietly. ‘I just hope I’m strong enough to do that,’ he said, looking up at his friend again. “How can I ever make up for all that I’ve done, Obi-Wan? How can I ever atone for my crimes?”

Obi-Wan took Anakin by the shoulders. “You will destroy the Sith, my friend,” he replied. “That is how. And you will have the love and support of those who love you to help you through it.”

Anakin nodded, his emotions getting the better of him. “Can you forgive me, Obi-Wan?” he asked. “Can you ever forgive me for what I did? For not listening to you when you tried to save me?”

Obi-Wan smiled. “I already have, Anakin,” he said. “I need to ask you the same thing; can you forgive me for Mustafar? For lying to your wife? For not listening to you on Delaya?”

“Yes,” Anakin replied as a tear ran down his face. “I can.”

Obi-Wan nodded, as his own eyes teared up. “I’ve missed you, my brother,” he said, pulling Anakin into an embrace.

Anakin hugged him back. “I’ve missed you too,” he said. “Lucky thing Dormé has it bad for you, or else you may never have found us.”

Obi-Wan pulled back and looked at Anakin. “What did you say?”

Anakin smiled. “You heard me,” he said. “She’s got it bad according to Luke and Leia,” he added, enjoying the incredulous look on Obi-Wan’s face.

“You’re making this up,” Obi-Wan said.

“I am not!” Anakin replied. “Ask her yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“I most certainly will not,” Obi-Wan retorted, flustered by this point. “The very idea.”

Anakin burst out laughing at this point, and slapped Obi-Wan on the back. “You are so clueless Obi-Wan,” he said. “Do I have to teach you everything?”

Obi-Wan was about to reply, and then realized that Anakin was teasing him, and merely smiled in response. “Come on,” he said. “You’ve over done it in more than one department

tonight, I believe.”

Anakin just continued to laugh as Obi-Wan steered him back towards his room.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

"Are we really going home today, Daddy?" Luke asked as the family sat in the refectory finishing their breakfast the next morning.

Anakin nodded. "We are indeed," he replied. "The doctor said I'm fine and ready to go home."

"I'm glad," Leia said. "I don't like it here. It's kinda boring."

Padmé and Anakin exchanged an amused look.

"Did you know that you and your brother were born here?" Obi-Wan asked Leia.

"Were we?" Leia asked, her interest sparked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, Obi-Wan is right," she told the children.

"I could even show you the very room you were born in if you like," Obi-Wan offered. "It will give your parents a chance to talk to the doctor before we leave."

"That's a good idea," Padmé said. "Thank you, Obi-Wan."

"Not at all," Obi-Wan replied with a smile, as he stood up with the children. "Come along little ones," he said as he ushered Luke and Leia away from the table.

Padmé turned back to Anakin, who she had noticed was rather quiet at the moment. "Something wrong?" she asked as she took a sip of her tea.

Anakin looked at her. "No, nothing wrong," he lied.

Padmé frowned. "Don't try to tell me nothing's wrong, Anakin," she said. 'I know better.' She stopped as she realized what it was. "It bothers you that Obi-Wan was present at the twins' birth and you weren't, doesn't it?"

Anakin rubbed his stubbly chin. "Yeah, it does," he admitted. "It's not that I resent him, Padmé; I'm over that now. I suppose I'm just... envious. When I think of what happened on that day..." he stopped as the memories of the agony he had undergone at the hands of Sidious' droids jumped to mind.

Padmé put her hand on his, stopping the flood of memories cold. "I know," she said softly. "But there's no sense thinking about the past, Ani; there is nothing we can do to change it. All we can do is look forward to the future, and be grateful that we are together now, all four of us."

Anakin smiled, lifting her hand to his mouth to kiss it tenderly. "I am grateful," he said. "More grateful than words can say, Padmé. But there will always be a part of me that has regrets, a part of me that wishes I could change the past."

"I know that," Padmé replied. "That's to be expected. I'm just so relieved that you and Obi-Wan have made peace."

"So am I," he replied. "I know that making peace with him was my test, Padmé, the last step I needed to take in order to rid myself of the Dark Side completely."

"And you did it," she said with a smile. "You have come so far in such a short time. I'm so proud of you, Ani," she added.

Anakin smiled. "I couldn't have done it without you, Padmé," he told her. "If it weren't for your steadfast belief in me, I would still be living in darkness. If you hadn't taken the chance to come to me for protection, I would have spent the rest of my life in that darkness, serving that monster that enslaved me in the first place."

"That won't happen, Ani," she told him. "You have won, and the dark side has lost."

"Not quite," Anakin reminded her. "In order for the Sith to be completely destroyed, I have to destroy Palpatine. He knows, Padmé. He knows that I'm alive and that I have renounced the Dark Side."

Padmé felt a wave of cold fear spread over her at his words. "Anakin, how? How could he possibly know?"

Anakin thought for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to explain it to her. "Think of the Force as a great body of water. What happens when you throw a pebble into a lake?"

"It makes concentric waves," Padmé replied.

Anakin nodded. "Exactly. The Force is something like that; when something happens to a Force sensitive, be it good or bad, it can be sensed by others, as though a pebble has been tossed into a lake. It sends out waves in the Force, ripples, or tremors. Well, imagine if you threw a boulder into a lake," he continued. "That is the magnitude of what has happened to me. Turning from the Dark side back to the light has caused a huge tremor in the force, a shock wave if you like. Palpatine has felt it, I know he has, I felt his reaction to it only yesterday. He knows Anakin Skywalker has returned, and he knows that I mean to kill him. And he's right, I do."

"But why, Ani?" she asked. "We have our whole lives ahead of us, we have our children, you have your health back; why would you risk all that now?"

"Because it is my destiny to do so, Padmé," Anakin explained patiently. "I am the Chosen One, and as the Chosen One I must destroy the Sith. I am already halfway there; destroying Darth Vader was half the battle. But I must destroy Sidious, or else he will find another apprentice and the Sith will rule the galaxy indefinitely. Can you see how important this is, Padmé?"

Padmé looked down at her hand in his. "Yes, I suppose I can," she replied. "It just scares me to think of you facing him, Ani," she said, looking up at him. "If something were to happen to you..." she stopped as her emotions overcame her.

"Nothing is going to happen to me," Anakin assured her. "I won't be alone, Padmé. I have three other Jedi to help me. The four of us will be no match for him. He *will* be destroyed, Padmé; I promise you."

Padmé only nodded, knowing her husband well enough to realize that there would be no dissuading him from this course of action. Anakin Skywalker was nothing if not single minded. And if she were completely honest with herself, Padmé would have to admit that there was a part of her that craved revenge on Palpatine for all that he had done. *He stole everything from us*, she thought angrily. *Everything! Perhaps it is right that Anakin make him pay for that.*

"I know you will fulfill your destiny, Anakin," she said at last. "And I will support you in doing what you feel is right, you know that."

Anakin smiled. "I know you will," he replied. "I couldn't do it without you, Padmé. Your love has made me what I am. I would be nothing without you."

Padmé said nothing, but merely leaned toward him and kissed him, allowing her actions to speak for her. Anakin kissed her back, holding her face in his hands, not caring if others in the refectory were watching their open display of affection.

"Let's go home," he said at last, looking into her eyes, his forehead touching hers.

Padmé smiled, recognizing the warm look in his eyes. "Yes, let's go home."

Anakin and Padmé caught up with Obi-Wan and the twins a short time later.

"Did you find it?" Padmé asked Obi-Wan. "The place where the twins were born?"

"No," Obi-Wan said, his eyes troubled. "It seems the maternity wing of the facility was....under renovations."

Padmé and Anakin looked at one another, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"That would be the handiwork of the emperor's henchmen," Anakin remarked bitterly. "In their obsession to find any record of Padmé and the twins' existence, they tore the place apart."

"Yes, it looked like it," Obi-Wan remarked. "I only hope the twins weren't able to pick up on the negative imprints I sensed there."

"I'm sure they were," Anakin replied, looking down at his children. "They are very sensitive."

"Yes, I've noticed," Obi-Wan said. "Are we all set then? Has Captain Tanik readied the ship?"

"I spoke to him earlier," Padmé said. "So hopefully we're all set to go."

"Let's be off then," Anakin said, taking his children by the hands. "I'm ready to go home."

Bail Organa was just leaving the docking bay as Anakin and his family arrived. It was obvious from the viceroy's face that something was troubling him deeply.

"Senator Organa," Obi-Wan said. "We didn't expect to see you back here! Is everything alright?"

"No, I'm afraid not, Obi-Wan," Organa replied. "I had a visit from the emperor."

Anakin frowned. "He knows I'm alive," he stated matter-of-factly.

Obi-Wan looked at him quickly. "Are you certain?" he asked. He looked back at Organa. "Did he say something?"

"He didn't say anything," Organa replied. "But he had the strangest... fit while I was with him. There's no other way to describe it. I thought the old bastard was having a heart attack."

"If only we could be so lucky," Padmé commented dryly.

"He was feeling the shift," Obi-Wan realized, looking back at Anakin. "He must have felt the change, Anakin. And now he knows."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, he knows," he agreed. "But that knowledge will not help him, Obi-Wan. His end is coming, and I think he knows it."

"He will be no match for you now, Anakin," Organa remarked. "Not now that you are healthy and whole again. I saw fear in his eyes, I'm sure of it."

"He should be afraid," Obi-Wan put in. "The Sith are about to be destroyed forever, he has good reason to be afraid. Four Jedi against one Sith; he doesn't stand a hope in hell."

"Gentlemen, language," Padmé said, frowning first at Obi-Wan and then at Bail.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said contritely.

"We are just on our way home," Anakin told Organa. "Are you coming?"

Organa shook his head. "I will go to Dagobah," he replied. "I will bring Yoda and Nejaa back to Delaya so the four of you can make your plans."

Anakin nodded. "Very good, we'll meet you back on Delaya in a few days."

"You will," Organa replied. "Good luck."

Anakin shook hands with the Senator, and then he and Obi-Wan escorted Padmé and the twins to the ship that was waiting to take them home, as Organa returned to his own ship to leave for Dagobah. Soon both ships were on their way, heading towards opposite ends of the galaxy.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52

Night had fallen on Delaya when the Skywalkers arrived there. Obi-Wan and Anakin each carried a twin to the house, both Luke and Leia having fallen fast asleep hours earlier.

The house was dark when they reached it, so Padmé went ahead to unlock the door and activate the lights. Opening the door, she stepped inside and then let Obi-Wan and Anakin enter carrying the twins. The house was quiet, and Padmé half wondered if Dormé had vacated the premises in their absence. But soon the sound of people entering the house and walking about awoke her, and she poked her head out of her room in time to see Obi-Wan enter the twins' room with Leia sleeping in his arms. Dormé hastily put on her robe and headed down the stairs to see what was going on.

"Padmé, you're home!"

Padmé, who was in the kitchen preparing to make a pot of tea, turned around at the sound of her voice. "Yes, we just got in," she said. "Sorry we woke you."

"It's okay," Dormé said, watching her friend, feeling terribly awkward with her. Things had been so strained the last time they saw one another that Dormé had to wonder where she stood with Padmé. The fact that Obi-Wan was in the house, and helping with the children made her think that perhaps they were not as bad as she had feared.

"Is everything okay?" Dormé asked. "Anakin... he's... he's alright?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes, he's fine," she replied. "We were able to get him there in time. He and Obi-Wan have mended their differences too. I suppose we have you to thank for bringing them together," she added with a smile.

"Padmé, you know I never meant any harm by leaving him that note," Dormé replied. "I truly thought that you had abandoned your idea of going to Vader. I didn't mean to cause any trouble, you must believe me!"

Padmé walked over to her friend and put her hands on her shoulders. "Yes, I know that Dormé. This has been a rough time for all of us. I want to apologize for the way I spoke to you the last time I was here, and for striking you. That was a terrible thing to do, and I'm sorry."

Dormé smiled, relieved beyond measure to have Padmé back in her corner. "I'm sorry too," she said. "For ever doubting you, for all the things I've said about Anakin. I should have known better than to trust your judgment, and for that I'm sorry."

Padmé smiled, and hugged Dormé. "I've missed you," she said. "You are my oldest friend, Dormé. I need you in my life."

Dormé nodded, her own tears preventing her from speaking. "You'll always have me, Padmé," she replied at last. "As long as you need me."

"Well, looks like the twins are down for the count," Anakin said as he entered the kitchen. He was surprised to see Padmé and Dormé hugging one another.

"Anakin, it's so good to see you well," Dormé said as she released Padmé. "I was so worried."

Anakin was surprised by her words, and looked at Padmé, who merely nodded.

"Thank you," he said at last. "It's good to be home. I don't suppose you have anything to eat lying around, do you?"

"I'm sure I can find something," Dormé replied with a smile.

"Great," Anakin replied. "Because I'm starving."

"So what else is new?" Obi-Wan quipped as he entered the room.

Anakin laughed and proceeded to help Padmé with the tea as Dormé bustled around to find something to eat for the four of them. She felt flustered to be in Obi-Wan's presence again, and couldn't even work up the nerve to look at him right away.

"It's good to see you again, Dormé," he said at last, sensing her nervousness.

She looked up from what she was doing and smiled at him, her cheeks turning pink. "It's nice to see you too, Obi-Wan," she replied. "Are you hungry too? I'd be happy to get something for you."

"That would be lovely, thank you," he replied as he sat down at the table.

Anakin came up behind Padmé and put his arms around her waist, kissing her neck.

"Ani, we're not alone!" she chided him gently.

"So?" he replied. "We don't have to pretend any more, Padmé. Do you realize that? We don't have to hide our marriage any more."

Padmé turned to him. "You're right," she replied with a smile. "Hard to imagine, isn't it?"

He nodded. "It is," he said. "But it's true. Now we can let the whole galaxy know how we feel about one another," he told her, kissing her again.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, but maybe right now isn't the best time to do so," she replied.

"Alright, alright," he said, releasing her. "I'll try to behave. For now at least," he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Can you reach that teapot up there?" she said, pointing to the top shelf.

Anakin brought it down effortlessly using the Force. "You mean this one?" he said, floating it to her.

"Show off," she said with a smile. "Thank you."

"No problem," he replied.

"Here we are," Dormé announced as she brought a plate of sandwiches and one of biscuits to the table.

“Thank you, Dormé,” Obi-Wan replied with a smile.

“Here’s the tea,” Padmé said, setting cups down before each of them.

“Where is Master Nejaa?” Dormé asked as she sat down.

“He went to Dagobah to find Yoda,” Padmé told her.

“I will be most interested to see what Master Yoda thinks of your transformation,” Obi-Wan remarked. “Although something tells me he already sensed it happening.”

“That’s very possible,” Anakin replied. “And only makes sense, since Palpatine did.”

Obi-Wan nodded solemnly. “Yes, I wasn’t surprised by that at all. It was really only a matter of time before he did so.”

Dormé, who really had no idea about how such things were possible, merely nodded in agreement, only too happy to be sitting beside Obi-Wan, listening to his accent again.

Anakin was about to reply when he stopped, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I think we’re about to be invaded,” he said.

Padmé looked at him in alarm. “What are you...” she stopped as Luke and Leia ran into the room. “What are you doing up?” she asked as Leia and Luke hopped onto their father’s lap.

“We’re hungry,” Leia announced. Luke nodded in agreement.

Anakin looked at Padmé. “Sounds rather suspicious to me,” he said.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I think so too,” she replied, offering the tray of sandwiches to the twins.

“You must be happy to be home,” Obi-Wan said to the twins with a smile.

Luke and Leia nodded as they munched on their sandwiches.

“It’s been very quiet around here lately,” Dormé remarked. “It’s good to have you back.”

“Obi-Wan, why did you hurt our daddy?” Leia asked, looking at the Jedi Master intently.

Obi-Wan was taken aback by her question, and was momentarily flummoxed by the child’s candor. He looked up at Anakin for help.

“Sometime adults disagree about things, Leia,” Anakin told her gently, “and sometimes we use physical means to settle those disagreements. It’s not right, but sometimes we do it anyway.”

“Sometimes Leia and me fight,” Luke piped up. “She sits on me and pinches my nose.”

The adults had to suppress their laughter at Luke’s solemn statement.

“And what do you do to her, Luke?” Padmé prodded.

Luke looked up at his mother. “Well, sometimes I pull her hair,” he admitted sheepishly. “But Mommy always makes us kiss and make up,” he hastened to add.

“Did you and Obi-Wan kiss and make up?” Leia asked her father.

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan and laughed. "Well, no," he replied. "We just hugged. No kisses."

Obi-Wan nodded with a smile. "Yes, Jedi don't do much kissing as a rule," he added. "Daddy kisses us all the time," Luke piped up. "And even Mommy too sometimes."

"Is that so?" Obi-Wan replied thoughtfully. 'Well your daddy has his own set of rules, little one,' he said looking at Anakin with a smile. "He always has."

"That's okay if you don't want to kiss Obi-Wan, Daddy," Leia spoke up. "Dormé will do it for you. I know she'd like to."

Anakin nearly choked on the mouthful of tea he had, and had to fight not to spray it across the table. Obi-Wan was utterly speechless, and Padmé covered her mouth to hide her smile.

"I...I'll start cleaning up this mess," Dormé stammered as she hastily rose from her chair.

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan with a smile. "Told you so," he said softly.

Obi-Wan merely shook his head, his face completely red.

"Maybe it's time we got these two into bed," Padmé suggested.

"Good idea," Anakin agreed, standing up with a twin under each arm. "Let's go you two. And don't tell me you're not tired. I caught you both yawning more than once."

"There's a bed set up in the room down the hall, Obi-Wan," Padmé said as Anakin left the room with the twins. "And a fresher across the hall."

"Thank you Padmé," he said. "I'm most grateful for your hospitality."

Padmé smiled. "Well, it's not exactly the palace of Theed, but it's cozy. I hope you sleep well."

"Thank you," he replied. "You too."

You could always ask Dormé to share her bed, Anakin said to him through the Force.

Obi-Wan shook his head. *Shut up and go to bed.*

Anakin only laughed in response as he proceeded up the stairs. Padmé followed behind, getting the distinct feeling that she had missed something.

"Now, time to go to sleep," she said as Anakin set the twins down in their room. "Hop into bed, both of you."

Both of the children complied, and were tucked in by their parents.

"Leia, you mustn't say things like that about Dormé," Padmé told her gently. "You embarrassed her."

"Not to mention Obi-Wan," Anakin added with an amused expression.

"Obi-Wan's face went all red!" Luke said. "Like that time he went swimming without sunscreen."

Padmé had to smile at the innocence of the twins. “Yes, it did,” she agreed. “Because he was embarrassed too.”

“Why are they embarrassed?” Leia asked. “They both want to kiss. Why would they be embarrassed?”

“Because they don’t want everyone to know it,” Padmé explained. ‘You mustn’t share the thoughts of others, Leia,’ she continued. “I know it’s easy for you to see what others are thinking, but it’s not always right for you to share those thoughts. Sometimes they are private, and shouldn’t be shared.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Leia said at last.

“Goodnight love,” Padmé said, leaning forward to kiss Leia. “Sweet dreams.”

Anakin closed the door quietly behind them. “I thought I was going to lose it when Leia said that,” he told his wife as they walked down the hall together.

Padmé smiled. “Yes, me too,” she replied. “Poor Dormé.”

“Poor Obi-Wan,” Anakin replied.

“You think he has feelings for her?” Padmé asked as they entered their bedroom.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but now I’m not so sure,” Anakin replied. “Leia certainly seems to think so.”

Padmé nodded. “She did say that. I’ve learned not to underestimate the twins’ hunches.”

“Very wise of you,” Anakin replied as he closed the door behind them. ‘But for now, let’s not worry about Dormé and Obi-Wan,’ he said, pulling her into his arms. “I have other things on my mind right now.”

Padmé raised her eyebrows. “Is that so?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “Shall I share them with you?”

“Absolutely,” she said as he pulled her closer.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53

Anakin found himself restless in the night. He had so much going on in his mind that sleep was evasive and sporadic. The confrontation with his former master weighed heavily upon him; not because he had any doubts about his course of action, but rather because the thought of facing Palpatine again bothered him tremendously. *How will I keep my anger under control when I confront him? How can I keep my hatred for him from betraying me?* He wrestled with these thoughts as he lay with his wife nestled up against him. The thought of Palpatine harming his family filled Anakin with rage. *But this rage is different, this rage is not borne of the dark side, this is merely me protecting my family.*

Anakin was close to sleep when he felt a tremor in the Force; no, it was not a tremor, it was an invasion. *Sidious is trying to contact me... he wants to see my thoughts.* Anakin slammed up his mental guards at once, preventing the evil Sith Lord from accessing his inner thoughts. *You will not win this time, Sidious,* he told him. *You have no idea what you have unleashed upon yourself with your lies and your betrayal, old man,* he told his former master. *I have been remade, I am whole and fully human now... your feeble skills are no match for me now old man. So prepare yourself, because you won't even see it coming.* He ended the psychic communication abruptly, pushing all thoughts of the Sith from his mind as he put an arm around his wife and drifted off to sleep.

Somewhere on the other side of the galaxy, the galactic Emperor sat bolt upright in his throne, as though starting from a nightmare. His withered, empty heart was pounding so violently in his chest that he feared it would burst; his pasty skin was bathed in sweat.

"Sire, are you alright?" one of the royal guards asked as they tentatively approached the throne.

Palpatine stared ahead of him, his yellow eyes looking at nothing in particular as he tried to control the shaking he felt in his ancient limbs. He felt something in the Force, he heard the challenge of his former apprentice, and, for the first time in a very long time, he was afraid. *Anakin Skywalker is alive...and he means to kill me...* Palpatine thought, trembling in mortal fear. *He knows my weaknesses, he knows everything about me... how will I possibly defeat him?*

"Sire?"

Palpatine finally turned his attention to the guard. "I want an entire squadron of clones sent to each quadrant in the galaxy," he said. "Anakin Skywalker is alive, and I want him and that bitch he's married to delivered to me personally," he said, trying to sound masterful. He was grateful that the deep hood he wore prevented the guard from seeing his eyes, for he was certain that the red robed sentinel would be shocked to see the fear in them. "Now!" he barked.

"At once!"

"Can I have more pancakes please, Mommy?" Luke asked as the family sat around the breakfast table the next morning.

"Of course," Padmé replied, placing two more on her son's plate. "How's that?"

"Good," he said with a smile. "Thank you."

Padmé leaned over and kissed Luke on the cheek. "You're welcome," she said. She looked up at Anakin who sat on the other side of Luke. "More, Ani?" she offered.

Anakin was lost in thought, however, and did not hear his wife's question.

"Anakin?"

Finally Anakin shook himself from his thoughts and looked at his wife. "Sorry angel, what did you say?"

Padmé frowned. "Are you okay?" she asked. "You seem light years away this morning."

Anakin sighed. "I suppose I am, in a manner of speaking," he replied.

Padmé watched his face for a moment. "Palpatine?" she asked simply.

Anakin nodded. "He's trying to find us, Padmé," he told her. "He's determined to find us. I won't let that happen."

Padmé nodded, believing and trusting in her husband completely, but still feeling a chill go down her spine at the very thought of that monster finding her precious children.

"Good morning all," Obi-Wan said as he entered the room. He immediately sensed the tension in the room and looked at Anakin, concerned. "Something wrong?" he asked as he sat down.

"Daddy's worried about the emperor," Leia informed him.

Obi-Wan was surprised by the child's insight and looked from her to Anakin.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, that's right," he said. "But don't you worry about him, Leia, or you either Luke. I have everything under control."

"We know, Daddy," Luke replied. "You are the best Jedi in the galaxy; Obi-Wan told us so."

Anakin smiled, and looked up at Obi-Wan. "He did, did he?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Well, you did have a good teacher," he said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. "Yes, the very best."

"Perhaps one day you two will become Jedi," Obi-Wan said to Luke and Leia. "I'm certain you would both make fine Jedi Knights."

"You're assuming of course that the Order can be restored," Anakin said.

"It will be," Obi-Wan replied. 'It is part of the prophecy, Anakin,' he explained. "You will destroy the Sith and restore balance to the Force."

"What is the Sith?" Luke asked, looking at his father.

Anakin looked at his young son, trying to formulate the words he needed to explain such a thing to him. “The Sith are the opposite of the Jedi,” he said at last. “They use the Dark Side of the Force, while we Jedi use the Light. They are evil, Luke, nothing but evil.”

Luke nodded. “That old man with the yellow eyes, he’s evil,” he said matter-of-factly.

Padmé and Anakin looked at one another, unsettled by their son’s remark.

“You’ve seen this man, Luke?” Obi-Wan asked.

Luke nodded. “Yes, both me and Leia have,” he replied. “We’ve had dreams about him hurting Daddy. But not like he is now, when he was wearing the mask. He used to hurt Daddy when he wore the mask.”

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin. “Is that true?” he asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, Palpatine is a sadist of the first order,” he said bitterly. “He enjoyed seeing his slave suffer both physically and psychologically, starting with the butchery I suffered at the hands of his droids. He would punish me for the smallest infraction, the most innocuous remark.”

Padmé frowned, sickened by the thought of Palpatine causing Anakin pain and taking pleasure from it. She remembered the occasion when she and the twins were still on board Vader’s ship when Palpatine had used Sith lightning to inflict punishment on his servant. *No more*, she thought, *never again*.

“I expect Master Yoda and Master Nejaa will arrive later on today,” Obi-Wan said. “We will need to make a plan, Anakin. Especially now that the emperor knows you are alive.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, very true,” he said, looking at Padmé, sensing her unease. “It will be over soon, Padmé, I promise you. And then there will be no more need for hiding.”

Padmé smiled, putting her hand on his. “I know, Ani,” she said. “I have total faith in you.”

Dormé entered the room at this point, having been outside picking berries from the garden behind the house.

“Good morning everyone,” she said, feeling terribly self conscious in Obi-Wan’s presence. “I have fresh berries here if anyone would like some with their pancakes,” she told them as she took the basket over to the sink.

“That sounds delightful,” Obi-Wan said, standing up. “Let me help you wash them.”

Anakin and Padmé exchange a look at Obi-Wan’s gallant gesture.

Leia watched Obi-Wan and Dormé and then turned to her parents triumphantly. “See?” she said with a smile. “I told ya.”

It was evening by the time the Tantive IV landed on Delaya carrying its most significant passengers. Yoda was impressed by the beauty of the planet, which reminded him a lot of Kashyyyk in its verdant splendor.

“Master Yoda, welcome to Delaya,” Obi-Wan said as he greeted the small party outside. “Please come inside. The twins are having their bath,” he added with a smile.

“Most anxious I am to meet the Skywalker twins,” Yoda said as he, Nejaa and Bail followed Obi-Wan into the house.

“Well if this is anything like their usual bath time, it could be a while before you do so, Yoda,” Nejaa remarked with a smile.

Organa chuckled as he followed the three Jedi into the house.

Dormé made the newcomers feel welcome and offered them freshly made wild berry muffins and tea. She excused herself to go upstairs and let Anakin and Padmé know that their guests had arrived.

Yoda watched Obi-Wan closely as Dormé left the room. *Most interesting*, he reflected. Obi-Wan turned around and looked at the diminutive Jedi Master. “What is interesting?” he asked.

Yoda smiled. “You tell me,” he said.

“Master Yoda, it’s good to see you again.”

Yoda looked over to the foot of the stairs where Anakin stood, shirtless and rather wet from bathing his twins.

“Who had the bath, Anakin,” Nejaa asked. “You or the twins?”

Anakin smiled. “Well, they do get a little carried away sometimes,” he explained.

“And you do nothing to discourage them,” Padmé said, coming behind him.

“Senator Amidala,” Yoda said, waddling over to her. “Most happy to see you again, I am,” he said with a warm smile.

Padmé smiled back. “It is good to see you too, Master Yoda.” She looked up at Nejaa. ‘And you as well, Master Nejaa.’ Last she turned to Organa. “Again you have our thanks, Bail. I don’t know what we’d have done without all your help.”

Bail smiled. “I’ve been happy to do what I can, Padmé,” he replied. “I have a feeling that the galaxy is about to change for the better, and I for one am honored to be a part of it.”

“You’re right about that, Bail,” Anakin said. “The galaxy is about to change. I mean to see to that personally.”

Yoda had not taken his eyes from Anakin since he had entered the room. As they had suspected, Yoda had sensed the change in Anakin, but to see it first hand was something else. *The Chosen One he is at last*, he reflected.

“Master Nejaa!” Luke exclaimed as he came down the steps in his pajamas, followed by his sister.

Anakin turned and took his children by the hands, the fatherly pride fairly emanating from him. “Master Yoda, I’d like you to meet our children, Luke and Leia. Children, this is Master Yoda, the wisest of all the Jedi Masters.”

Luke and Leia looked at the diminutive being before them. He was not at all what they expected, but neither of them questioned for a moment that he was truly a powerful Jedi.

“Good to meet you, it is,” Yoda said to the children. “Strong you are with the Force, like your father.”

“You’re small,” Leia said, much to the embarrassment of Anakin and Padmé.

Yoda’s smile only grew at the child’s candor. “Yes, so I am,” he agreed. ‘But size makes no difference when one has the Force as his ally. Teach you, we will,’ he said, nodding his head slowly. “The Jedi Order, the future you are.”

Anakin stood behind his children, a hand on each of them. He looked down at Yoda. “They are the reason I have been redeemed, Master Yoda,” he said. “They and my wife. They were my life line through all of this.”

Yoda continued to nod. “Yes, so I see,” he replied. “Great love you have for them, and they for you. Perhaps it is time to rethink some of our ways, don’t you think, Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan nodded with a smile. “Yes, I think so, Master. It seems we have underestimated the importance of family all this time.”

“We have indeed,” Master Nejaa said, looking at Anakin with a smile. “The Chosen One has taught us just how important a family is, for I know without his family Darth Vader never would have returned to the Light.”

“But he did return,” Padmé spoke up at this point, coming over to Anakin’s side and holding his hand. “He is gone, irrevocably and completely.”

“Yes, he is,” Yoda agreed. ‘And now the Sith he will destroy,’ he added, “and fulfill the destiny he was born to.”

Anakin nodded, squeezing his wife’s hand warmly. “Thank you, Master Yoda,” he said. “Thank you for believing in me, for not giving up on me. Your faith in me means more to me than I can say.”

Yoda looked up at Anakin appraisingly. “I have always had faith in you, Anakin,” he replied. ‘It was you who lacked faith in yourself. Now, much planning we have to do,’ he said, turning to the others. “Time is short, for the emperor knows of your redemption.”

“Yes, he does,” Anakin replied. ‘Come children,’ he said, holding his hands out to the twins. “Time for bed.”

Luke and Leia, who were fascinated by the old Jedi Master, took their father’s hands reluctantly and went up to bed with he and their mother.

Chapter 54

Chapter 54

Having settled the twins for the night, Padmé and Anakin rejoined the others downstairs.

“You know Palpatine better than any of us,” Organa said, addressing Anakin. “What will he do now that he knows you’re alive?”

“He will send out clones,” Anakin replied. “Thousands of them, in an effort to find me. He’s afraid,” he added with a smile. “I could feel it.”

“He ought to be,” Obi-Wan said. “He doesn’t stand a chance against you now, Anakin, and he bloody well knows it.”

Anakin nodded. “I think so,” he replied. “He didn’t foresee this happening, and it has him rattled. He has always thought of himself as being omniscient — it is unnerving to realize that he isn’t.”

“His actions would indicate that he is panicking,” Nejaa said. “Sensing out thousands of clones to search the galaxy? Rather desperate measures, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, I’d say so,” Organa said. “Of course, he doesn’t have Darth Vader anymore to do his dirty work for him,” he added, looking at Anakin. “Clones aren’t nearly as effective without someone to command them.”

Yoda nodded. “Correct you are,” he said. “Excellent at following orders clones are, but few are capable of independent thought.”

“They’re something none of you are taking into consideration,” Padmé spoke up at this point.

The others turned to her expectantly.

“Anakin has just recovered from a life threatening injury,” she said, looking at her husband with concern. “He nearly died from a blow that normally would have barely affected him. Clearly his body is not ready yet for a battle the likes of which you are all anticipating.”

“You’re right, Padmé,” Obi-Wan replied. “Sith lightening would be deadly now in Anakin’s present recuperative state.”

“We may not have the luxury of time, Padmé,” Anakin said to his wife. “I would like nothing more than to have plenty of time to get my full strength back; but we never know when he will strike, when his clones will find us. We have to be ready at any time.”

Padmé frowned. “I don’t like the thought of this,” she said quietly. “It’s just too risky.”

“Time we will have,” Yoda spoke up. “Weeks it will take for the clones to discover your hiding place. Time enough for Anakin to make a full recovery.”

"I hope you're right, Yoda," Nejaa said. 'We almost lost him once,' he added, looking at Anakin. "I don't believe any of us want to go through that again."

"No, we certainly don't," Padmé said, reaching out and taking her husband's hand. "I have already lost him once, I won't lose him again."

Anakin looked at his wife and squeezed her hand. "You won't lose me again, Padmé," he averred. "I promise you."

"Well it's been a long day," Obi-Wan said. "Perhaps we all ought to get a good night sleep."

"A good idea," Nejaa agreed. "We need to be alert to prepare for what is coming."

Imperial City-Coruscant

"No leads yet, sire," Commander Daws reported nervously. "We have squadrons scouring every sector; it's only a matter of time before..."

"Only a matter of time?" shrieked Palpatine. "Only a matter of time before Skywalker makes his move! He is just biding his time, waiting for the right moment to strike."

Commander Daws was unsure how to respond to the emperor's outburst. He had never seen Palpatine so agitated, and had certainly never seen him so terrified.

"It's been close to a month," Palpatine continued. 'Double the number of clones,' he decided. "Two squadrons in every sector! I want no planet unsearched, do you understand me?"

Daws hesitated to tell the emperor that such a drain on the Empire's defenses could be dangerous, particularly with the recent increase in skirmishes with the newly established Rebel Alliance. He knew better than to question Palpatine's orders; he had witnessed first hand what befell those foolhardy enough to do so.

"I will see to it at once, sire," Daws replied, bowing to the incarnation of evil before him.

Planet Delaya

Nearly a month had passed since Yoda and Nejaa had joined the Skywalker household. Bail Organa had, of course, returned to Alderaan, but had sent additional security men as well as more provisions. Quarters were rather cramped in the small cottage, but they were making do the best they could.

Luke and Leia, although aware that something was worrying the minds of the adults in their lives, were innocent enough not to let it bother them. They were having too much fun with all the new, interesting guests in their home. Yoda was of particular interest to the twins. As for Yoda himself, he found himself becoming uncharacteristically fond of the Skywalker children, and spent a great deal of time with them, teaching them the ways of the Force and marveling in their natural abilities. He had begun teaching them how to shield themselves from discovery by other Force sensitives. Yoda did not explain to them the reason why this skill was so important just now, and the twins didn't ask. They just thought it was cool to be able to hide from their father on occasion. Anakin found it to be somewhat less than cool.

“Care for a hand with that, Dormé?” Obi-Wan asked one evening as she prepared dinner. Obi-Wan had come to realize that Dormé was not alone in her feelings, that he himself had significant feelings where she was concerned that were not of a Jedi-like nature. At one time he never would have allowed himself to feel anything for a woman; he would have sublimated those feelings and ignored them utterly until they disappeared over time. But now, things were different. Anakin was married with children, Yoda had seen that the value of having a family; so what was to stop him from pursuing a relationship of his own? Besides, he had found himself envious of Anakin’s relationship with his wife and children; part of him longed for such a relationship of his own.

“Sure, thanks,” Dormé replied with a smile as she handed him a bowl of potatoes and a peeler. “Hope you don’t mind peeling,” she added.

“Not at all,” he replied, picking up a potato. ‘I learned how to cook when I was a Padawan, many years ago,’ he told her. “I’ve peeled many a potato in my time.”

Dormé laughed. “I had no idea you were so accomplished, Obi-Wan,” she said.

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Well, perhaps in some things,” he admitted. “In others I’m still something of a novice,” he said, looking at her, hoping she realized what he was saying.

Dormé understood what he meant. “Well we all need to start somewhere,” she told him, putting a hand on his shoulder as she stood up from the table.

Obi-Wan smiled and returned his attention to the task at hand.

“Come along children, it’s time to get back to the house,” Padmé called as she and Anakin picked up the toys and books that the twins had brought with them. It was a warm day in late summer; the leaves of the enormous forest that surrounded the cottage already bore the signs of autumn.

“Is there anything left in their room?” Anakin remarked with a smile as they continued to pick up toys.

Padmé laughed. “Well, considering they have a houseful of toys, thanks to a certain someone, this barely makes a dent in them.”

“Ah yes,” he remembered with a nod. ‘I had a lot of fun picking those out you know,’ he told her as he picked up the basket of toys. “Just seeing the look on the storekeeper’s face was almost as fun.”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, I’m sure he must have been rather shocked seeing Darth Vader toy shopping.”

“He was rather surprised to say the least,” Anakin replied. “Particularly when I was picking out dolls for Leia.”

Padmé laughed again as they walked towards the path. “Luke, Leia, you’ve gathered enough berries,” she called to them. “Time to get back into the house.”

But Luke and Leia were not collecting berries where they were mere moments ago. Anakin looked at Padmé, a feeling of unease blossoming within him. *They were just here—we only stepped a meter away to pick up the toys... damn you Yoda and your bright ideas...*

“Ani...” Padmé said, her own fear growing.

“Luke! Leia!” Anakin shouted as he ran through the forest, his heart pounding within him. “LUKE! LEIA!”

“We’re right here, Daddy. We found a bigger patch of berries, see?”

Anakin whirled around to see his twins, each holding a basket overflowing with berries, their faces both besmeared with berry juice.

Anakin wanted to scream he was so relieved to see them. “Padmé, over here!” he called. He took the baskets from them and set them on the ground, and then hugged them tightly; not wishing to frighten them with what he feared had happened.

“That’s great,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “Please don’t wander off again, okay? And no more shielding yourselves from me. You scared your mother and me.”

“Sorry,” Leia said looking at her twin sheepishly as Padmé came running over. She hugged the twins too, doing her best to hide her terror.

“Come along,” Anakin said, picking up the baskets and handing them to the children. “Time to get back home.”

Luke and Leia took their mother’s hands and the four of them headed back to the house.

Chapter 55

Chapter 55

Planet Delaya

"The twins have certainly mastered their shielding abilities well," Anakin told Yoda later that evening. "Perhaps too well. Even I couldn't locate them for a few moments. It was terrifying."

Yoda nodded. "Important it is that they can hide, Anakin," he reminded him, "Save them it may."

Padmé frowned. "I hope it never comes to that," she said. "Palpatine doesn't know about them, isn't that what you said, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes, Bail and I made sure that the data banks at Polis Massa contained false information. But the twins are so strong; it is only a matter of time before the emperor senses their existence. That is why it is so important that they know how to hide themselves, Padmé."

"I understand that," Padmé replied. 'I just wish it wasn't necessary, that's all,' she added quietly. "I just want this to be over; I just want to have a normal life with my family."

Anakin could sense her frustration and anxiety, and took her hand in his. "It will be over soon, Padmé," he assured her. "Perhaps it is time to take matters into our own hands," he suggested, looking at the other Jedi.

"What are you suggesting?" Nejaa asked. "That we go to him?"

Anakin nodded. "Exactly," he replied. "He is not expecting it, not with all the clones all over the galaxy trying to find us."

"But how do we get close enough with his royal guards everywhere?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Clearly we need a plan," Nejaa said. "A surprise attack would be the most effective. As Anakin has already told us, Palpatine is afraid. We must use that to our advantage. Now that you are healed Anakin, it is time to consider taking the initiative and making the first move. After all, the best defense is a strong offense."

Yoda nodded. "Yes, very true," he agreed. "If unprepared he is, easier our task will be."

"Anakin, do you know where he is right now?" Obi-Wan asked. "You were able to sense his fear; can you also tell where he is?"

"He spends a great deal of time on Coruscant," Anakin replied. "He is paranoid about the Senate, and feels like he needs to be close at hand."

Padmé nodded. "He's just looking for a way to dissolve the senate permanently, isn't he?"

"I'm sure he would like nothing better," Anakin replied. "It's the last vestige of democracy, although the senators really have no power anymore. It's a farce, Padmé, it's not a real governing body."

"Yes, it's a slap in the face to those who value real democracy," Padmé responded.

"And a breeding ground for the Rebel Alliance," added Nejaa. "I can tell you that from my own experience. I am amazed how short sighted the emperor is."

"Short sighted the Jedi were as well," Yoda spoke up. "Arrogant we were not to see the threat right under our very noses until it was too late to stop it."

"Nor did we see what he was doing to one of ours until it was too late to stop it," Obi-Wan added, looking at Anakin. "I blame myself for that."

Anakin shook his head. "Don't blame yourself, Obi-Wan," he said. "It was my own arrogance and recklessness that allowed me to fall into Palpatine's trap. You have nothing to feel responsible for."

"Perhaps not," Obi-Wan replied. "But I still do."

"Pointless this conjecturing is," Yoda spoke up. "The past cannot be changed. The future we must look to now."

"Yes, the future," Anakin said, looking at his wife with a smile. "So let's make a plan."

Imperial City— Coruscant

Adia Passik reread the expense report on the datapad. *That can't be right*, she thought in confusion. She verified the data for the third time, and reached the same conclusion. *Darth Vader's expense account was accessed on the same day that he died? How is this possible??* Adia was a meticulous book keeper— she needed to be in order to keep track of the enormous wealth and expenses of the Galactic Empire. She had done this job for nearly two years, and had been able to account for any anomaly, no matter how small. But this one had her stumped.

"Arfour, come here please," she called to her assistant. The droid trundled over to her at once.

"How may I be of assistance?" the droid asked.

"These dates can't be right," she said, indicating the dates of the death of Darth Vader and that of the huge amount of money spent on his account.

The droid checked through the imperial data base and then double checked. "They are correct, Miss Adia," it pronounced. "I have cross checked and verified twice."

Adia sat back in her seat. "But how can this be?" she asked. "Unless someone has used his account..." *but that's highly unlikely... who could or even would try to impersonate Darth Vader??*

"I think I need to let someone know about this," she said at last. "Do me a favor, Arfour; find out where all this money was spent. Get as much information as you can on what was

purchased, where it was purchased, anything at all you think might help shed some light on this.”

“I shall get to work on it right away,” the droid replied.

Planet Alderaan— the next day

Baku Haerch had been in the business of selling toys for much of his fifty-three years. His father had been in the same business. Haerch was already grooming his daughter to take over the business when he retired a few years down the road.

The life of a toy salesman isn’t exactly an exciting one, but it was a lucrative one, particularly when your shop was located in one of the more exclusive areas of Aldera. Of course, there were occasions when life dealt you a surprise, like the day Darth Vader had come into Haerch’s shop. That particular incident had been fodder for many stories told over the dinner table in the Haerch household for the many weeks since it had occurred. It had even been good for business, giving the little shop notoriety that he had previously not enjoyed. Today, however was not a day that Haerch would consider exciting. Unnerving yes, but exciting, definitely not.

It had started at opening, or rather half an hour before opening when a number of imperial storm troopers lead by a young brash officer demanded to be let into the establishment. Haerch was no fool, and did so at once.

“What can I do for you, captain?” the mild mannered shop keeper asked.

“We need to see your sales records,” Captain Ruellis told the man. “For the past two months.”

“Very well,” Haerch replied with a bow. “Follow me if you please.”

Haerch lead the group into his small office where he sat down at the computer terminal. He accessed the dates in question and brought them up on the screen. “Is there something in particular you are looking for?”

Ruellis nodded his eyes on the screen. “Yes, we are,” he said. “Get up,” he added, indicating for the man to get out of his way. Haerch complied at once.

Ruellis scanned over the information, looking for something not even he believed he would ever see. And then he found it. *There it is...* he let out a whistle of surprise when he saw the huge amount of money that had been spent, but more so by the name of the person whose account had been charged for the enormous purchase: Darth Vader.

“Can you remember this order?” Ruellis asked the shop keeper who stood wringing his hands nervously behind him.

Haerch peered over the captain’s shoulder at the screen. “Oh my yes,” Haerch replied. “That was the biggest order this store has ever placed,” he told the captain proudly. “With the delivery charges, I made almost 30,000....”
“Delivery where?” Ruellis asked, cutting him off.

“Delaia,” Haerch replied. “I have the coordinates somewhere,” he added, trying desperately to be helpful.

“That would be very helpful, thank you,” Ruellis said, standing up. He looked at the clones in his command. “We’ve got them,” he said with a smile of satisfaction.

Chapter 56

Chapter 56

Imperial City-Coruscant

The emperor read over the report from the squadron that had been searching in the Alderaan System. He had to reread it to make sure that he had understood it correctly. *A toy store? Vader purchased a small fortune at an Alderaani toy store and had them delivered to Delaya?* It took the old man a few moments to piece it together, but when he did, a sinister smile spread over his wizened face. *It seems the twins did not die at birth after all,* he reflected. *Foolish man, to think that you could hide them from me indefinitely.*

He looked up at the officer who had delivered the report. “Has the squadron searched Delaya?”

“They are on their way right now, sir,” he replied. “Apparently the coordinates provided by the shopkeeper were erroneous, for they corresponded with one of the most heavily forested areas of the northern hemisphere. It could take them a few days to locate them, sir.”

“They are there,” Palpatine stated. “I have no doubt of it. Have them search every square hectare of Delaya on foot if need be, I want them found.”

“Yes sir.”

Planet Delaya

It had taken several days to work out the details, but at last the four Jedi had come up with a plan of attack. Bail Organa’s help had been enlisted, and he was only too happy to help in any way that he could. He had bidden his time for five years waiting for an opportunity to depose the tyrant Palpatine; he was more than ready to do anything he could to see it happen.

The evening before the Jedi were to leave Delaya, Anakin and Padmé had the twins out for a walk, trying to make the most of their last few hours together before Anakin left in the morning with his comrades. Padmé had done her best to manage her fear, but it was difficult to do so. Luke and Leia knew that something momentous was about to happen, but they did not know what. Still, they sensed that their parents were preoccupied and worried, and so they were as well.

“The plan is a sound one,” Anakin assured his wife as they strolled along. “We have all the advantages, Padmé. He is outnumbered, he will not win.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said quietly. “But I can’t help but be scared, Ani. I know what he is capable of. The thought of something happening to you, especially now...”

Anakin turned to her and took her by the shoulders as the children watched a small rodent scurry up a tree. “Especially now that you’re pregnant?” he asked with a smile.

Padmé stared at him in astonishment. “How... how did you know?” she asked.

Anakin took her face in his hands and kissed her softly "I've suspected for a few days now," he said. "Besides, I haven't been able to keep my hands off of you for weeks," he added with a grin. "It's not really that surprising is it?"

Padmé shook her head with a smile. "No, I suppose not," she said. 'I just wish,' she began, and stopped as the tears that seemed to flow so easily during pregnancy came. "I hate the thought of you anywhere near that monster," she told him.

"Padmé, nothing will happen to me," he told her. "Don't worry."

She smiled. "I just can't help it," she said. "I..."

"Mommy, Daddy, look! A deer!" Leia said as she and Luke followed the small, brightly colored animal.

"Luke, Leia, stay close!" Anakin shouted after them.

But it was clear that the appeal of a small furry creature was too much for the twins to resist, so Padmé and Anakin were forced to join them in their chase. They lost sight of the twins for a moment, and suddenly Anakin was seized with a wave of panic. He turned to Padmé as he realized what it meant: *someone else is in the woods...*

"Where did they go?" Padmé asked aloud as she stopped. "Luke, Leia! Come back at once!"

"This way," Anakin called, following their Force signature to a nearby thicket, no doubt where the deer had fled to in its pursuit. *Hurry....they're getting closer...*

"Stop right there!"

Anakin and Padmé froze as a group of clones stepped out of the woods, two of them holding Luke and Leia captive.

"Release them!" Anakin demanded, reaching for his light saber.

"One move and they're dead," the clone said, as those holding the children captive trained their weapons on them.

"Don't hurt them!" Padmé cried. "Please!"

"Drop the fancy laser sword," the clone commanded. "Do it!"

Anakin realized that he had no choice but to comply. Were he alone, he would take out the entire group of them; but he wasn't alone. And he daren't take a chance with the safety of his family. He dropped his light saber to the ground.

"Smart move," the clone said. "Now come with us," he said, pointing his weapon at Anakin and Padmé.

"Release the children and their mother first," Anakin said, using the Force to manipulate the clone's mind. "Let them go, you are not interested in them."

"Let them go," the commander said. "We're not interested in them."

Luke and Leia ran away from their captors towards their parents.

“Ani, I’m not leaving you!” Padmé cried, reaching out to him.

“Padmé, you need to get the children to safety,” he said. ‘All of them,’ he added with a smile. “Please, just go!”

“Now let’s move,” the commander said, pulling Anakin away from his family. Anakin looked at his wife, realizing he had no choice but to comply if he were to protect his family. He looked down at the twins, speaking to them through the Force. *Run*, he told them. *Don’t say a word, just run back to the house with your mother and tell Obi-Wan what has happened. Go!*

Luke and Leia looked at their mother and took her hands, and then did as their father had told them. Padmé looked back one more time through her tears at Anakin, and then ran with the twins as fast as they could until they were out of danger.

“Let’s go,” the commander said as Anakin was bound and shoved forward by two clones. “The emperor is expecting you.”

Padmé and the twins didn’t stop running until they reached the house. Obi-Wan met them in the yard, his own senses telling him something was wrong.

“Obi-Wan!” she cried as she tried to catch her breath. “They have him! They have Anakin!”

“Who has him Padmé? Clones?” Obi-Wan asked, steadying her with his hands on her shoulders.

Padmé nodded. “Yes! They took him! They... they were in the woods!”

Obi-Wan looked down at the twins. “Luke, Leia, run and fetch Master Yoda and Master Nejaa,” he instructed. “Tell them what has happened.”

“I wanted to go with him!” Padmé cried, “He wouldn’t let me! Obi-Wan, he just has to be alright!”

Obi-Wan hugged her close as she cried, his own anxiety rising within him.

“Time to go,” Nejaa said as he and Yoda exited the house. “This isn’t exactly how we planned it, but that won’t deter us.”

Yoda and Dormé came out of the house at this point, along with the head of the Alderaani security detail who had been assigned to protect the family.

“We can leave as soon as you wish,” the guard told Obi-Wan. “The ship is ready and waiting.”

Obi-Wan nodded his understanding. “We will go at once,” he told Padmé. “You stay here, Padmé. I promise you, nothing will befall Anakin. I won’t lose him a second time.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said softly.

Obi-Wan turned to Dormé next, who stood watching the scene, trying to contain her own fears. He walked to her and pulled her into an embrace. *Conventions be damned*, he thought.

“I’ll be back soon,” he told her, taking her face in his hands.

Dormé could only nod, too overcome by her emotions.

“Let us be off,” Nejaa said.

Padmé walked over to Dormé and the two women held onto one another as they watched the three Jedi disappear into the forest.

Chapter 57

Chapter 57

Imperial Star Destroyer — en route to Coruscant

Anakin was bound and kept under heavy guard during the voyage. He reasoned that they were going to Coruscant, but was not sure. He watched the clones carefully, looking for the smallest chance to make a move. But they had obviously been forewarned about the unusual abilities of their captive, and kept a very close eye on him for the slightest movement. Anakin could only hope that Obi-Wan and the others were on their way. Unarmed, he would face a tremendous challenge alone; the emperor's wrath would be great.

"Where are we going?" he asked at last, focusing his mental energy on the clone sitting across from him.

"Shut up," the clone replied, brandishing his blaster.

"*Where are we going?*" Anakin repeated, putting more emphasis behind his words.

"Coruscant," the clone replied. "The Imperial Palace."

Anakin nodded his understanding. *Just as we suspected*, he thought, relieved that his comrades were on the right track. He only hoped they would not be long in arriving.

Planet Delaya-late that same night

"Well they are finally asleep," Dormé said as she entered the kitchen. She turned and looked at Padmé, who was sitting at the table, a look of anxious fear on her face.

"Padmé you must try to relax," Dormé said, putting a cup of tea in front of her. "Worrying is only going to do the baby harm."

Padmé nodded. "I know," she replied, picking up the tea cup. "I'm trying, Dormé, but it's not easy."

Dormé sat beside her and put a hand on her arm. "I know," she said. "I'm worried too. But they are Jedi, Padmé; they won't let Palpatine win, not this time."

"But Anakin is alone," Padmé responded, staring at the spiral of steam rising from her cup. "And unarmed. Anything could happen to him before Obi-Wan and the others even find him."

"Anakin is the strongest Jedi in the galaxy," Dormé reminded her. "He has found his way out of many difficult situations, remember? He is going to be just fine, Padmé."

Padmé looked up at Dormé, her eyes troubled. "I hope so," she said softly. "I don't know what I'll do if something happens to him," she said, bringing her hand to her mouth as her tears started again.

Dormé knew there was nothing she could say to comfort Padmé, and so she simply put her arms around her and held her.

Imperial City— Coruscant

A phalanx of clones escorted Anakin from the shuttle onto the private landing platform of the Imperial residence. Twilight had fallen on Coruscant, the sky above them darkening as they made their way towards the entrance of the palace.

Anakin summoned the living Force around him to remain calm, using the techniques taught to him as a boy so many years before. He knew that Palpatine would be looking for any sign of weakness, any lingering traces of Darkness within him to exploit. Anakin was determined not to let him find any.

“This way, Skywalker,” the clone behind him said, shoving him forward. Anakin kept his cool, much to his own surprise, and walked calmly forward in the direction indicated by the armored soldiers. Soon they were met by a group of crimson robed royal guards, all armed with Force pikes. The sight of them was daunting, but Anakin maintained his calm and did not change his expression when they took him from the clones.

Through the Force Anakin could feel the dark presence of his former master drawing closer. Anakin braced himself, steeling himself against the dark malevolence he could feel swirling around him in ever intensifying waves. Palpatine was out doing himself, doing his utmost to intimidate the young Jedi. *It won't work, Anakin vowed. He has no power over me, not any more...*

The silent royal guards stopped at a doorway and held their pikes before Anakin, indicating him to stop. Anakin complied at once, taking a deep breath, knowing that the moment of truth was at hand. The great door opened, and the guards stepped aside, permitting Anakin entry into the room. To his surprise, they left, leaving Anakin alone with the emperor.

“So we meet again, my young, treacherous apprentice,” Palpatine pronounced in a voice dripping with contempt.

“I am not your apprentice, Sidious,” Anakin replied calmly. “Not any more.”

Palpatine narrowed his yellow eyes, regarding the young man before him. “You may wish to reconsider that decision, Lord Vader,” he cautioned. “I am not a man you wish to have as an enemy.”

Anakin raised an eyebrow as he sensed the truth behind the old man's words. “I think you have that backwards, your majesty,” he said with a smile. “I can see your fear, Sidious; *you* are afraid to have *me* as an enemy.”

“Arrogant fool,” Palpatine snapped, angry that Anakin had seen through his words. “You'll pay for that arrogance, and for your treachery!”

With that the emperor unleashed a bolt of blue Sith lightning, directed at Anakin's chest. To his utter shock, Anakin held his hands out and gathered the energy, deflecting it back to the emperor with remarkable calm and astonishing ease. It took the old man by surprise, and knocked him off balance for a moment.

“I am not the human wreckage you created five years ago,” Anakin said, advancing upon the terrified old man. “I am whole again, human again, and my powers have increased tremendously.”

Palpatine could see that the young man before him was indeed far more powerful than he had ever been as Darth Vader, and it unnerved him. He steadied himself and approached Anakin once more, this time using a different tactic.

“Yes, so you are,” Palpatine replied, nodding with approval. ‘Strong and young, as you were when you pledged yourself to me five years ago,’ he added. “Or have you forgotten that oath?”

“I was a fool to make such an oath,” Anakin told him, standing his ground. “A fool to trust you and believe your lies.”

Palpatine was furious at the young man’s determination, but he pressed onward, nonetheless, realizing that he had nothing to lose.

“You were the finest apprentice I’ve ever known, Lord Vader,” Palpatine said, softening his approach. “I would be willing to...overlook your recent transgressions if you continue in your apprenticeship. There is still much I can teach you, your powers are limitless now. Let me show you how to use them!”

“Apprenticeship?” Anakin retorted. “You mean slavery! I have been nothing more than a slave to you these past five years, Sidious! Why would I even consider returning to a life of servitude?”

“I will make things different this time,” Palpatine replied, not even caring how desperate he sounded. “I will give you the command of the Death Star, if that is what you wish! You may even keep your wife with you, since I know what a weakness you have for the pleasures of the flesh,” he commented sourly.

Anakin smiled. “Is that all you think my wife means to me?” he asked. “A means of physical gratification? You would have no understanding of the bond that exists between she and I; you know nothing of love or of anything but the darkness that exists within your empty heart.”

Palpatine’s rage flared up again, and he raised his hands to strike down his treacherous servant. But Anakin could read his former master’s thoughts easily, and used the Force to push him across the room before Palpatine had a chance to unleash. The old man crashed against his throne, which broke apart with the impact.

Anakin advanced upon the emperor, the fear he felt emanating from the old man strengthening his confidence. Palpatine looked up at him, still crouched on the floor, and with a quick movement that belied his age; he withdrew his lightsaber and held it out, the tip of it dangerously close to Anakin’s chest.

“So this is how it is to be,” Palpatine hissed, rising to his feet slowly, forcing Anakin to retreat. ‘After all that I have done for you,’ he continued, his anger consuming him. “You betray me! You will pay the price for that betrayal, Vader!” he shrieked, running at him wildly.

Anakin wasted no time to leap over the raging madman, flipping over him with tremendous ease and landing squarely behind him. “The name is Skywalker,” he said, kicking the emperor squarely in the back, sending the old man sprawling and his lightsaber skittering across the floor.

Palpatine reached out his hand to retrieve his weapon as Anakin ran and jumped to reach it first. He stood looking down at the old man, as he kicked the lightsaber away. "Hardly seems fair that you have a weapon when I am unarmed," he said. "After all, you are a sith," he added with a smile.

Palpatine looked up venomously at the powerful young Jedi, only to have Anakin's right boot connect with his face. The old man screamed as he held his broken nose, blood spurting out from between his fingers. In his rage he held out a hand to Anakin throwing an energy bolt directly at him. Anakin fell back, struck by the lightning, cursing himself for his cockiness. The time it took for him to recover gave Palpatine a chance to collect his wits about him and get to his feet.

"You will pay for this outrage, *Skywalker*" Palpatine spat, advancing upon Anakin as he tried to shake the effects of the sith lightning from his body. "Now!"

Planet Delaya

Padmé woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of her children's screams. She leapt from the bed, heart in her throat and ran down the hallway to their room, Dormé met her there.

Padmé flung open the door, activating the overhead lights and looked at her children. Both of them were sitting up in their beds, crying inconsolably.

"Luke! Leia!" she cried as she ran to them. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She took them in her arms and did her best to console them. "What is it?" she asked. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Leia looked up at her, her small face streaked with tears. "Daddy," she whimpered. "Daddy....he's hurt..."

Padmé looked up at Dormé with alarm. "Oh gods, Dormé," she said softly. "Anakin..."

Chapter 58

Chapter 58

Anakin shook the last remnants of energy from his body as he focused on the emperor's movements. As Palpatine raised his hand to deliver another lightning blast, Anakin reached for the discarded lightsaber and brought it before him in time to deflect the blast back at his adversary. This only made Palpatine more furious, and he used both hands to send an even more potent blast at Anakin. Anakin gripped the hilt of the lightsaber tightly using all his strength to withstand the energy bolt and deflect it back. This time Palpatine was sent backwards, his face bloodied and twisted with rage.

He got to his feet again, his anger fuelling his weakening body.

"It's over, Sidious," Anakin said, watching the emperor warily. "You can't defeat me, I am the Chosen One. Surely you knew that," he taunted.

"No Jedi will defeat me," Palpatine retorted, advancing upon Anakin again. Suddenly the door burst open. Anakin turned to see Obi-Wan, Nejaa and Yoda rush into the room, lightsabers at the ready.

Palpatine took advantage of Anakin's momentary distraction to Force push him across the room. Anakin slammed against the wall, the lightsaber falling from his hands.

"You're outnumbered, Sidious," Obi-Wan told him as the three Jedi advanced upon him. "You won't win this time."

"You underestimate the power of the Dark Side, Master Kenobi," Palpatine responded, reaching for his lightsaber and coming at the three of them, brandishing his weapon.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan called, tossing him his lightsaber. Anakin caught it easily, and joined his comrades as they circled around the Sith lord, like wolves around their prey.

"The sith's rule is over," Nejaa said. "Your time has ended, Sidious. Lay down your weapon, or you will be destroyed."

"The Sith will never surrender," Palpatine spat. "If you want to destroy me, you'll have to kill me."

Anakin glanced at Obi-Wan. "Well, if he insists," he remarked and advanced upon the emperor alone, fighting his former master furiously with incredible speed and power.

Obi-Wan moved forward to help his friend in the battle, but Nejaa pulled him back. "This is his fight, Obi-Wan," Nejaa told him. "He is the Chosen One, he will not fail."

Obi-Wan looked at Nejaa and nodded, and then turned back to the duel, torn between helping Anakin and allowing destiny to run its course.

Palpatine backed away, surprised by the ferocity of the young Jedi. He parried and deflected his blows as best he could, but it was soon apparent that he was no match for

Anakin. Wheezing he stumbled on, fighting with every last ounce of energy that he possessed. It wasn't long before that energy gave out, and he allowed Anakin to disarm him, sending his lightsaber flying across the room.

Anakin stood before his former master, keeping a tight rein on his emotions. "This is the end for you, Lord Sidious," he said ominously, raising his blade high above his head. With a lightning fast stroke, Anakin sliced through one of the dark lord's arms at the elbow. "That is for the slaughtered Jedi," he said as Palpatine shrieked in pain.

"This is for my family whom you stole from me," Anakin pronounced next as he lopped off Palpatine's other arm.

"And this is for the five years of hell you put me through," he finished, slicing the sith lord's head off with one swift blow of his saber. The mutilated remains of Palpatine fell to the floor as his head rolled to one side. Anakin stared at the carnage, the only sound he could hear the hum of his lightsaber. He looked down at the red sith blade in his hand and threw it away in disgust. And then he turned back to the other three Jedi in the room, suddenly remembering their presence.

"It's done," he said simply, feeling exhausted all of a sudden.

Obi-Wan came over to him at once and supported him with an arm around his waist. "Yes, it is done," he said. 'You did it, Anakin,' he told him. "You destroyed the Sith. Their reign of terror is over now, forever."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, forever." He looked at the other Jedi. 'Time to rebuild,' he told them. "The galaxy has suffered enough because of the Sith."

Yoda nodded as he waddled over to Anakin. "Never again will the Sith have reign over the galaxy," he said. "You have fulfilled the prophecy, Anakin, the Chosen One you are."

Anakin smiled, the relief and the magnitude of what had just transpired hitting him all of a sudden. He looked at Obi-Wan, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for coming after me," he said.

Obi-Wan shrugged, trying not to let his own emotions get to him. "Well, I figured I owed you at least one," he replied wryly.

"At least," Anakin returned with a smile.

"We must let the Senate know what has happened here," Obi-Wan suggested. "They will need to move quickly in order to secure control of the senate."

Yoda nodded. "With the emperor dead, democracy can return to the galaxy," he said.

Anakin smiled, thinking of how pleased Padmé would be to hear that. "Let's go," he said. "How difficult is it going to be to get out of here?"

"We made rather short work of the imperial guard," Obi-Wan told him. "Our exit shouldn't be a problem."

"Then let's go," Anakin said. He bent down and picked up his Sith blade, looking at it thoughtfully. "I will be happy to replace this soon," he said.

Obi-Wan smiled. "That can be arranged," he said.

Senate Chambers — later that same night

Bail Organa was sitting in his office, drumming his fingers nervously upon the arms of his chair as he watched the evening traffic streaming past his window. His mind, however, was anywhere but on the traffic, or any senatorial matters. He knew that the Jedi had planned their attack upon the emperor the very next morning, and he was waiting anxiously for the moment to arrive. If they were to succeed, it would mean an end to the tyranny that the galaxy had been subjugated to for the past five years, a return to democracy and the values of the Old Republic. *But if they fail...*

Organa stood up and commenced pacing about in his spacious office, the anxiety of waiting too much for him. If they should fail, it would mean the end of the Jedi presence in the galaxy. The twins of Anakin Skywalker, though Force Sensitives, would have no one to train them in the ways of the Jedi... the order would die. Bail ran a hand over his beard, the thought of a galaxy without hope of redemption more than he wanted to contemplate. *They must succeed*, he thought desperately. *The fate of the galaxy depends upon it.*

"Excuse me your Excellency."

Bail looked over to see his assistant standing in the doorway.

"What is it?" he asked.

"There are four Jedi Knights here to see you," she replied.

Organa was surprised to hear it. "Show them in at once," he told her as he made his way across the room to meet them.

"Senator Organa," Obi-Wan began as he and his comrades entered the room. "I apologize for the lateness of the hour," he began, ever the stickler for protocol.

"I don't give a damn about the hour, Obi-Wan," Organa responded, "I'm too anxious to go home anyway. I'm rather surprised to see you here, though. Has there been a change of plans?"

"In a manner of speaking," Anakin replied. "The emperor is dead."

Organa looked at Anakin, his eyes widening. "What did you say?"

"He's dead, Bail," Anakin repeated. "Not an hour ago. We've put an end to the tyranny of the Sith once and for all."

Bail wasn't sure whether to laugh or to cry, the emotions within him were so strong they threatened to make him lose his famous composure. "You did it," he said simply, looking at the four Jedi before him. "You really did it!"

Nejaa nodded, a small smile on his face. "Yes, we did," he said. "We did our part, now it's your turn. We need you to tell the senate that the days of the Empire are finished," he said. "And that democracy is the new order of the day."

Bail couldn't help a brief show of emotions as his eyes grew shiny for an instant. "I... I would be most pleased to do so," he replied.

Planet Delaya

It had been a long night in the Skywalker household. Padmé and Dormé had managed to settle the twins back to sleep, but Padmé stayed in their room sitting in a chair watching them. She had no doubts of their ability to sense what was happening to their father that was what frightened her. The fact that they had managed to calm down enough to fall asleep gave her guarded optimism that perhaps things had swung in Anakin's favor, or perhaps the other Jedi had arrived. *I wish I knew what was going on...* she thought anxiously. *If only I knew what was happening...*

"Excuse me, Mistress Padmé," Threepio said as he poked his head in the door.

"What is it Threepio?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"There is a message coming in for you from Coruscant," the droid told her.

He barely had the words out of his mouth before she rushed out the door past him and ran down the stairs.

She raced to the comm. station and sat down, tears of relief springing to her eyes when she saw the face of her beloved Ani on the screen.

"Ani!" she cried. "You're alright!"

Anakin smiled. "Yes, I'm fine, angel," he assured her. "Palpatine is dead, and we're all fine."

"Oh Ani," she sobbed, the relief and fear spilling out of her.

"Don't cry baby," he said, wishing he could be there to comfort her. "We're with Bail Organa right now. He's preparing a statement to be made to the senate first thing in the morning. I think maybe you'd like to be here to witness that."

"But how?" she asked. "We don't have..."

"Captain Antilles is on his way to collect you, Dormé and the twins right now," Anakin told her. 'He ought to be there,' he checked his wrist chrono. "I'd say within the next three hours. Can you be ready?"

"Can I be ready?" she asked with a smile. "I think I can manage it."

Anakin smiled. "I love you, Padmé," he said.

"I love you too, Ani," she replied, the tears streaming down her face. "I'm so proud of you."

Anakin's smile grew. "Thanks angel," he said. "I'll see you soon."

Padmé nodded. "I can't wait," she replied. Anakin's image faded out as Padmé stood up to go and tell Dormé the news. She was already standing in the doorway, her own tears almost as profuse as Padmé's.

"They're okay, Dormé!" Padmé cried as she hugged her friend. "They did it!"

"Should we wake up the kids?" Dormé asked.

“I think we’ll have to if Captain Antilles is on his way,” Padmé said, wiping the tears away. “Come on, let’s go pack.”

Chapter 59

CHAPTER 59

Imperial City-Coruscant

In light of the recent and unexpected death of the emperor, Bail Organa assumed temporary leadership of the Imperial Senate, as interim leader of the Empire until such time as things were more settled. He had called an emergency session of the Senate for first thing in the morning.

The four Jedi had left none alive in the Imperial Palace who could link the death of the tyrant to them. Besides, who would believe that there were any Jedi left after the purges? Obi-Wan had destroyed the surveillance holocameras before they left the palace, and, as part of their master plan, had planted evidence linking the crime to a certain Grand Moff Tarkin who was promptly arrested upon the discovery of Palpatine's dismembered body. Tarkin, of course, had no idea that he had been set up by his former adversary, Darth Vader, who was only too happy to see the arrogant officer take the fall.

It was well into the night when the four Jedi finally took some rest. Bail Organa offered his own personal apartments for their use. Obi-Wan and Yoda had accepted his offer, while Nejaa and Anakin declined it, both having somewhere else to stay for the night. The five agreed to meet at the Senate Chambers first thing in the morning, and parted for the remainder of the night.

"Where can I take you, Nejaa?" Anakin asked as he and the older man flew one of Organa's personal speeders through the city.

"One of the apartment complexes on Republica Boulevard," Nejaa replied.

Anakin looked at him in surprise. "Pretty nice neighborhood," he commented. "Who do you know there?"

Nejaa smiled rather sheepishly. "My wife," he said.

Anakin nearly lost control of the speeder. "Your *wife*?" he exclaimed. "You have a wife?? Since when? Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Nejaa shrugged a little self-consciously. "Well, probably for the same reasons you didn't tell me about your wife," he replied. "Nara and I have been married for close to twenty years now. We have four children, three sons and a daughter."

Anakin shook his head in amazement. *Perhaps that is why we always go along so well*, he reflected. *We had a lot in common, even though we didn't even know it.*

"Nejaa, you never cease to amaze me," Anakin said at last with a grin.

Having left Nejaa to enjoy a joyful reunion with his family, Anakin proceeded to 500 Republica Boulevard, to the apartment he had shared with Padmé five years earlier. He had no idea what to expect when he got there: whether it had been left in the expectation that the

family of the owner would claim the belongings, if they had, or if it had been completing vacated and someone else was now living there. *I'll find out soon enough*, he thought as he landed his craft on the landing platform behind the complex. He headed for the elevator, hoping that the security code he still possessed would work. It did, and soon he was making his way upward to the penthouse suite.

As the lift brought him closer to the home he had shared with his wife, a thousand memories flashed through his mind. How many times had he ridden this lift in barely contained eagerness, knowing that soon he would be in the tender embrace of his beloved wife. How many moments of passion had begun at door of this very lift, when Padmé would be there waiting, unable to wait another minute to be in his arms. *And I threw that all away*, he reflected bitterly. *For what? For the promise of power that never existed... and if it weren't for her devotion and belief in me, I would still be living that nightmare.*

The doors opened, and Anakin was met with darkness. Tentatively he stepped into the foyer, activating the lights at once. The apartment was deserted, and, more than that, it had been untouched in the past five years. A flood of memories assaulted Anakin as he walked into the great central room of the complex, memories of happy times, of joyful reunions. He smiled as he remembered the many times he'd surprised Padmé in this very room, her squeals of joy at seeing him making him laugh with delight.

Walking over to the large sofa Anakin sat down, suddenly feeling exhausted from the ordeal he had just been through. Kicking off his boots, he laid back on the couch, just to rest for a moment, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

Anakin's sleep was interrupted in what seemed a shockingly short time later by someone covering his face in kisses. He slowly opened his eyes, half expecting to see his wife's face lying beside his in their bed. Instead, he saw the faces of his children, their eyes wide with excitement at seeing their daddy again. He smiled at once and grabbed them both in his arms, returning their kisses with equal zeal.

"We were scared, Daddy," Luke told him as Anakin sat up, still holding the two of them in his arms. "We saw what that bad old man did to you."

Anakin kissed the top of his son's head. "That old man won't ever hurt me again, Luke," he said. "He's gone now, and we never have to worry about him hurting anyone again."

"That's right, children, your father had made sure that we are all safe, just like he promised he would."

Anakin looked up to see his wife and Dormé standing there. He smiled, the sight of his wife making his joy complete. He set the kids down and stood up to greet her. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck tightly, trembling with the emotions that were still running rampant through her.

"You did it," she said softly as she stroked his hair softly. "I knew you would, Anakin, I never doubted for a moment that you would."

Anakin took her face in his hands. "It's over, Padmé," he said. 'Bail Organa has assumed control of the Empire and means to restore power to the Senate this very morning,' he said. "The Empire has been toppled."

Padmé shook her head in amazement. “I can’t believe it,” she said softly. “It’s like every dream I’ve ever had has come true. And it’s all thanks to you,” she added, kissing him softly.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Dormé said at last, feeling like third wheel. “But where is Obi-Wan?” she asked.

Anakin looked over at her. “He spent the night at Bail Organa’s apartment,” he told her. “But we are all expected at the Senate chambers this morning. He’s fine, Dormé,” he added, sensing how worried she was about the man she loved.

Dormé smiled. “That’s good to hear,” she said. “Perhaps we should get over there, it’s almost 8.”

Anakin nodded. He looked down at himself. “I’m...kind of a mess,” he said, looking at the rumpled and ripped garments he still wore from the previous day. He didn’t want to tell Padmé how many aches and pains he had, but the thought of standing under a hot shower was immensely appealing to him.

“I’ve brought you some fresh clothes if you want to clean up,” Padmé said. She looked around the apartment. ‘I can’t believe that nothing has changed,’ she said in amazement. “I guess my parents didn’t have the heart to sell the place.”

“Good thing,” Anakin replied. “We may just need a place to stay once the senate clamors for your return,” he told her.

Padmé smiled. “Well, I think that will have to be put off for at least a few months,” she said, rubbing as yet flat abdomen.

Anakin smiled. “Yes, I suppose so. Four children will keep you busy.”

Padmé’s eyes widened. “Four?? Did you say four?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he said with a smile. “I guess twins must run in the family,” he added.

“Oh my,” Dormé laughed. “You certainly *will* be busy.”

“We will indeed,” Anakin said with a smile. He kissed Padmé on the cheek. “I’ll go get cleaned up.”

It was a brilliant morning when the Skywalkers and Dormé set out for the Senate chambers. The sight of the impressive building brought back a flood of memories for Padmé, both good and bad. She never imagined she would be setting foot in it again, and certainly never dreamed that the senate she had devoted nearly a decade of her life to serving would once again return to its position of importance. She was nervous at the prospect of revealing herself to her former colleagues, all of whom had believed that she died five years earlier. Would they feel betrayed by her lie? Or would they understand the reasons that compelled her to fabricate her own death? She wasn’t even sure how much they knew about her life, or that her husband had until recently been Darth Vader.

“Bail has reserved a box for us,” Anakin told his wife. “This way.”

As they drew closer to the place where they would take their seats, Dormé caught sight of Obi-Wan standing in the corridor with the other three Jedi. Ignoring protocol, and the stares

of passersby, she ran to him. Obi-Wan turned in time to see her coming, and smiled, the sight of her filling him with joy. He held out his arms to her as she reached him, holding her close.

“I was so scared,” she told him.

Obi-Wan smiled and stroked her hair gently. “It’s alright, Dormé my dear,” he said. “I’m fine. Everything will be just fine now.”

She pulled back and looked at him, not able to hold back any longer. “I love you, Obi-Wan,” she said, stroking his ginger beard softly. “I’ve loved you for years. I don’t care if Jedi aren’t supposed to have emotional attachments; I just know I love you.”

Obi-Wan held her gently by the shoulders. “All that has changed, Dormé,” he said. “Besides, I wouldn’t care anymore if it hadn’t,” he said, admitting his feelings at last. “I love you, Dormé,” he said. “And I don’t give a damn who knows it.”

Dormé was overjoyed, tears springing to her eyes. He pulled her close to kiss her, not caring who was watching them in the crowded corridor.

“Daddy, Daddy,” Leia said, tugging on her father’s sleeve.

“Yes Leia?” he asked, looking down at her.

Leia merely pointed in the direction of the oblivious lovers kissing in the corridor. Anakin tapped Padmé on the shoulder and nodded in their direction.

“Finally,” Padmé said. “She’s been mooning after him for more than five years now,” she said.

Anakin grinned. “Well I’m happy for them both,” he said. “Life is far too short to spend it without someone to love.”

Padmé squeezed his hand. “I couldn’t agree more,” she said with a smile.

Chapter 60

Chapter 60

The Senate Chambers were soon full, the atmosphere electric as everyone buzzed about the news. *Palpatine was dead!* The news was on the minds and the lips of everyone, all conjecturing what would happen next. Was this the end of the Empire? Had the emperor left an heir? What was going to happen to the senate now? Not since the inception of the Empire was there such an air of expectation and uncertainty amid the austere senate members.

Bail Organa met up with the small party waiting for him outside the great hall of assembly. He was as excited as they were and shook hands eagerly with each of the Jedi.

"This is it," he said as he straightened his tunic for the hundredth time. "Are you ready?"

"We're more than ready," Anakin replied. "The question is, are *you* ready?"

Organa laughed. "Anakin, I've been ready for this moment for five years," he replied. He looked at Padmé. "Ever since that day we sat in the hall and listened to the end of democracy."

Padmé nodded. "I remember that day well," she said. "Today is the day to correct that horrible mistake."

"It is indeed," Organa said. "Shall we? The members seem to be getting restless in there."

"Lead the way, Chancellor," Obi-Wan said with a smile, taking Dormé's hand.

The assembly hall was noisy as the small group stepped into the box lead by Bail. As soon as the members noticed him, they started to quiet down, and when Bail came forward to the front of the booth, the enormous room fell silent.

"My fellow senators," he began. "You all know why we are here today. You have all heard the news of the assassination of Emperor Palpatine."

Murmurs were heard amid the senators, and then a few of the more bold ones started to applaud. The applause began to spread, until soon the entire assembly was applauding. Anakin turned to Padmé and shook his head in amazement, a smile on his face.

"Seems the Hero with no Fear is alive and well," Obi-Wan remarked to Anakin with a smile.

Organa did not wish to put an end to the spontaneous show of approval for the assassination of the tyrant Palpatine, and had to hold himself back from joining in. However, he merely waited patiently for the applause to die down, which it did in a few moments.

"This is an historic moment, my friends," Organa continued. "A moment many of us thought would never come, the moment when democracy has been reborn."

The reaction this time was loud and boisterous, cheering and loud shouts of approval were heard throughout the hall.

“Mommy, what’s democracy?” Leia asked her mother.

“Freedom,” Padmé replied, her eyes brilliant with tears. “Democracy means freedom, Leia.”

Leia nodded, though not fully understanding, appreciated the significance of it nonetheless. She and Luke could both sense the tremendous joy and relief from both their parents, and realized even in their own small way that they were witnessing something tremendously important here today.

“Upon learning of the death of the emperor late last night,” Organa continued, “I took steps to ensure that the galaxy would not descend into more civil war. I think we can all agree that the people of this galaxy have seen enough war to last a life time. I assumed leadership of this body to prevent such anarchy from befalling us, with the intention of laying it down in order to...”

His words were stopped by the shouts of the assembled senators. “I move to nominate Bail Organa Supreme Chancellor!”

“I second the motion!”

Soon the room had erupted into shouts of approval for the appointment of Organa. He turned to his friends, shocked by the outpouring of support.

“You heard them, Chancellor,” Anakin said with a smile. “You are the man they want to lead the new Republic. And personally I think they have made an excellent choice.”

Organa smiled. “I did not expect this,” he told them. “Truly... I had no idea their reaction would be so strong.”

“They know what a strong leader you are, Bail,” Padmé told him. “The galaxy needs strong leadership right now. It needs you. You are the best choice to usher in a new era of peace, to herald the beginning of a new Republic. They know it, we all do.”

“Thank you, Padmé,” Organa replied. “That means a lot coming from you.”

“Call for a vote, Senator,” Nejaa suggested. “I think it’s time to make this official.”

Organa nodded. “Yes, perhaps you’re right.” He turned back to the crowd and held up his hand for them to be silent.

“My friends,” he began. ‘Your support overwhelms me,’ he told them. “But if I am to assume the leadership of this noble assembly, I want it to be my legal means. Therefore, I would like to call an official vote. But before I do, are there any other nominations for the position of Chancellor?”

Not a name was put forward, making the whole idea of a vote rather redundant. Still, Organa was a stickler for protocol, and wanted everything to be done in a legal and democratic way.

“I don’t think this will take long,” Obi-Wan said as they stood outside in the corridor as the voting commenced.

“A formality it is only,” Yoda replied. “The Chancellor has already been elected,” he added, looking up at Bail with a smile.

Organa smiled. “And I have all of you to thank for making this possible,” he said. “You are the real heroes of this rebirth, the true authors of this new chapter of history. I am merely honored to be a small part of it.”

“Not a small part,” Anakin said. ‘The help that you have given my family and I these past few months has been tremendous,’ he told him. “Were it not for your faith in my humanity, and your trust in me, this may never have transpired. Do not underestimate the importance of the role you have played, Chancellor Organa. You have been a key player in this incredible story.”

“I appreciate you saying so, Anakin,” Organa replied. “But without you, there would have been no story. You are the centre of all of this, Anakin; the catalyst, the true hero of the day.”

Anakin smiled, and looked down at his children, the look of hero worship in their eyes tugging at his heart strings. “It was the least I could do,” he said softly. “To make amends for what I have done over these past five years.”

“And amends you have made,” Yoda spoke up.

“The Order shall be remade thanks to you, Anakin,” Nejaa said. “And your children will be the future of that Order.”

“And yours as well,” Anakin said with a smile. “Not to mention yours, Obi-Wan,” he added, looking at Obi-Wan.

Kenobi simply raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, and then looked at Dormé with a smile. “Perhaps so,” he said.

“The voting is over,” Bail’s assistant announced as she joined the small group in the corridor.

Organa nodded. “Thank you,” he said. He turned back to his friends. “Shall we?” he said with a smile.

In the lower city, later that same day

“Obi-Wan! My old friend!” Dex said as he waddled over to greet the Jedi and his companions. ‘I thought you’d been killed in the purges!’ He wrapped all four meaty arms around Obi-Wan and squeezed him tightly. “I never thought I’d see you again!”

“It’s good to see you too, Dex,” Obi-Wan replied, returning his friend’s embrace as best as he could. ‘I think you remember Anakin, my old padawan?’

Dex released Obi-Wan and grabbed Anakin next. “Of course!” he replied, hugging Anakin tightly. “It’s good to see you, Anakin!”

Anakin smiled. “Thanks, Dex,” he said. “This is my family, my wife Padmé, and our children, Luke and Leia.”

“Very nice to meet you all!” Dex said, shaking hands with all three of them at once, which caused Luke and Leia to giggle.

“And this,” Obi-Wan said, turning to Dormé, “is a very special lady in my life, Miss Dormé Kymeri. Dormé, meet a very old and dear friend, Dex.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dex,” Dormé said, smiling and holding out a hand to him.

Dex grinned. “High time you had a lady in your life, Obi-Wan!” he chuckled, causing the reserved Jedi to blush. ‘It’s a real pleasure to meet you, Miss Dormé,’ he said, shaking her hand vigorously. “Now what can I get you all? You here for lunch?”

“But of course,” Obi-Wan said. “Best oonberry pie on Coruscant!”

Anakin smiled, nodding with agreement as he helped his wife and children take a seat around the table Dex had shown them.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had oonberry pie,” Dormé said. “But it sounds delicious. I’m starved.”

“Me too,” agreed Anakin. “How about you two? You hungry?”

“Uh huh!” Leia agreed with a vigorous nod of her head. Luke seconded her with a nod of his own head.

“I’ll be right back with some menus,” Dex said as he waddled away.

“I like Dex,” Luke said. “He’s funny.”

“He made your face turn red, Uncle Obi,” Leia said with a giggle.

Anakin grinned. “It doesn’t take much to do that, does it Uncle Obi?” he teased.

Obi-Wan merely smiled and turned to Dormé. “Do you see what I have had to put up with this youngling for the past almost twenty years?” he said shaking his head with mock disdain.

Dormé laughed, and reaching over planted a kiss on Obi-Wan’s cheek, making him blush again, much to the amusement of Luke and Leia who giggled furiously.

“Well laugh all you wish, you two,” Obi-Wan said. “We may just have to find two other younglings to serve as attendants for our wedding.”

Anakin nearly choked on his drink. “Wedding??” he asked, looking at Obi-Wan and then at Dormé. “When did all this happen?”

“On the way over,” Dormé said, her smile growing. She looked at Obi-Wan with obvious adoration. “He took me quite by surprise, I must say,” she added.

“Congratulations!” Padmé said, reaching over and hugging her friend. “I’m so happy for you both!”

“Yes, congratulations,” Anakin agreed with a smile

“We’d be honored if you and Padmé would be our witnesses,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another with a smile. “We would be most happy to do so, wouldn’t we angel?” Anakin said, putting his arm around his wife.

Padmé nodded. “Nothing would make me happier,” she replied with a smile.

“Imagine, Master Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi is getting married,” Anakin said with a smile. He raised his glass. ‘To new beginnings,’ he said. “And good friends.”

The other adults raised their glasses and joined Anakin in his toast.

Chapter 61

Chapter 61

Four months later...

"Would you stop fidgeting?" Anakin said as he helped Obi-Wan add the last touches to his wedding attire.

"I am not fidgeting," Obi-Wan replied, wiping the sweat from his brow. "It's just so bloody hot in here," he muttered.

Anakin had to keep from laughing at his friend, knowing how nervous he already was. "It is exactly the same temperature it always is," he told him calmly. "You are just a nervous wreck, that's all."

"I most certainly am not," Obi-Wan returned. "Jedi Masters do not get nervous."

Anakin stepped back and looked at him. "Is that why you're sweating?" he asked with a grin.

"Aren't you supposed to be helping me?" Obi-Wan retorted good naturedly. "Not making matters worse with your... observations?"

"Sorry, sorry," Anakin replied. "Touchy, aren't we?" he added, unable to resist.

Obi-Wan just shook his head with a smile. "You are making me wish I'd chosen a different witness, you know that?"

Anakin laughed. "Too late for that, Obi-Wan," he said. "You're stuck with me for the duration. All set?"

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "Yes, I believe so," he replied.

Anakin put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "All kidding aside, Obi-Wan," he said. "I am truly honored to be your witness today. I never imagined in a thousand years that things would be back to the way they were between us. I just wanted you to know that I missed you, I missed our friendship. I missed teasing the hell out of you," he added with a grin.

Obi-Wan had to laugh. "Yes, I'm sure of that," he said. He looked at his friend for a long time. "I missed you too, Anakin," he said. "I am so grateful that you were able to forgive me. Your friendship means more to me than I can say."

Anakin nodded. "I think we should get downstairs," he said. "Or your bride is going to beat us to the altar."

"Well that wouldn't do at all, would it?" Obi-Wan said as he adjusted the folds of his cloak one last time. "I guess this is it," he said.

"Yep, no backing out now," Anakin said. "Unless you climb out that window over there," he added with a grin.

“Not a chance,” Obi-Wan said. “My bride is waiting.”

Anakin and Padmé sat watching the newly weds danced together. Padmé had offered the use of her family’s home in the lake district of Naboo for the wedding, enabling Dormé’s family to attend the joyous event. It was a small gathering, but the atmosphere was a festive, joyous one as the family and friends of the happy couple helped celebrate their union in holy matrimony.

“Padmé, are you alright?” Anakin asked her. “You look as though you’re light years away.”

Padmé turned and looked at her husband. “Yes, I’m alright,” she assured him. “I’m just thinking about my family,” she said.

Anakin nodded his understanding. When they had first arrived on Naboo several days earlier they had gone directly to her parents’ home, only to find it empty, with no sign of her parents’ whereabouts. They inquired at the homes of neighbors, only to learn that the Naberries had packed up and taken an extended trip off world, destination undisclosed. Padmé had been very anxious to see her family, for they, like the rest of the galaxy, had spent the past five years believing she was dead. She had been devastated to not find them home, and wondered where they could be.

“I’m sure they’ll be home soon,” Anakin said, knowing what it was that had her so pensive. “They didn’t sell the house, after all.”

Padmé nodded, the disappointment still nagging at her, preventing her from truly enjoying the party. “I hope so,” she said. “I miss them, Anakin. I want so much to see them again.”

Anakin reached over and took her hand. “And you will,” he said. “I am certain of it. And they will spoil Luke and Leia and these two new babies rotten, as only grandparents can do,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé had to smile too. “You think so?”

Anakin nodded. “Of course,” he said, standing up and taking her hand. “I plan to spoil our grandkids rotten one day, don’t you?” he asked her with a smile.

“I suppose so,” she said.

“Now come with me,” he said. “I want to dance with my beautiful wife,” he told her, helping her to her feet.

“You mean your huge wife,” she said with a smile.

Anakin put his arms around her. “You never look more beautiful than you do when you’re carrying my babies, Padmé,” he told her softly.

“Oh, Ani,” she said, tearing up. “That’s a beautiful thing to say.”

“It’s the truth,” he told her. ‘Now come,’ he said, leading her to the terrace. “Let’s dance.”

Obi-Wan and Dormé left later that night for their honeymoon and by midnight the enormous house was empty but for the four Skywalkers and the handful of household servants who maintained the property. Luke and Leia, who had enjoyed themselves

immensely at the wedding, had fallen asleep in record time when Anakin and Padmé had finally managed to get them to bed. The house was quiet, the night clear and warm, the ebony sky riotous with stars as Anakin and Padmé stood on the terrace enjoying the peace and tranquility of the lovely Naboo countryside.

"Quite a day," Anakin said, looking up at the stars. "Never in a thousand years did I ever imagine Obi-Wan getting married."

Padmé smiled. "No, I'm sure no one did, especially Dormé."

Anakin laughed. "Well, it goes to show that persistence does pay off in the end."

"Yes, I've come to know that quite well," she said.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I know you have," he said. "Your refusal to give up on me changed the face of the galaxy, Padmé. Imagine that."

"I didn't set out to change the galaxy, Anakin," she said, turning to him. "All I wanted was to find the man I loved. I knew he was still alive, I knew if I looked for him I would find him."

"I was never completely gone," Anakin replied, taking her hands in his. "But if you hadn't sought me out, I would never have known redemption. You saved my soul, Padmé."

Padmé smiled. "Your soul is a part of my own, Anakin," she told him. "I wasn't complete without you."

"Nor I without you," he replied, taking her face in his hands. "You complete me, Padmé," he said, kissing her softly.

"Daddy, can I have some more juice please?"

"Sure, here you go, Luke," Anakin said as he refilled his son's glass. "You want some too, Leia?"

"Yes please," Leia replied, holding her glass up for her father.

Anakin and the twins were seated at the large table enjoying breakfast. It was still quite early, and Anakin had insisted that Padmé remain in bed to catch up on her sleep. She had not argued with him.

"Can we go swimming later?" Leia asked. "Mommy said she used to swim out to that island when she was a little girl."

Anakin smiled. "Yes, she did," he replied. "We swam out there a few times together when we were here on our honeymoon."

"What's a honeymoon?" Luke asked.

"Well, it's a special vacation you take after you get married," Anakin explained. "Like what Obi-Wan and Dormé are doing now."

"They were doing too much kissing yesterday," Luke decided. "It was gross."

Anakin had to laugh at his son's disdain for romance. "You know Luke, you might think differently about kissing when you get older," he told him.

Luke shook his head. "No way," he averred.

"But Mommy and Daddy kiss you," Leia pointed out.

"Yeah, that's okay," Luke replied. "I just don't want any girls kissing me," he said.

Anakin nodded. "I see," he said. He looked up when he saw one of the household servants enter the room.

"Excuse me sir, but we appear to have visitors," she told Anakin. "A gondola has been spotted approaching the estate."

Anakin stood up. "I'll see who it is," he said. "You two stay here," he said to the twins.

Luke and Leia were curious about the visitor, but did as their father bade them.

Anakin walked outside and crossed the terrace and down the stone stairway to the dock. "Can I help you, sir?" asked the guard standing sentry.

"I just wanted to see who the visitors were," Anakin said, watching the approaching gondola. He shielded his eyes against the bright morning sun, and then smiled when he saw who was seated in the gondola.

"Good morning children," Padmé said as she joined Luke and Leia. "Where is your Dad?"

"He went down to the water to see who was here," Leia told him.

"Oh?" Padmé said as she sat down with her children. "I wonder who...." She stopped when she saw Anakin enter the room, followed by her parents.

"Padmé!!" Jobal cried, running to her daughter.

"Mom! Dad!" Padmé cried, pushing herself out of her chair and making her way to her parents.

Jobal and Ruwee embraced their daughter tearfully, the relief and joy of finding filling them both.

"Oh my dear sweet girl," Jobal said, kissing Padmé's face. "You're alive!! You're really alive!"

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner, but it was for my own safety, and the safety of Luke and Leia."

"Luke and Leia?" Ruwee asked, looking at the children who had joined Padmé by this point. He smiled at them. "That must be you," he said, addressing his grandchildren.

Luke and Leia nodded, confused by the entire scene.

Padmé looked down at the twins. "Luke, Leia, this is your grandfather," she said, looking up at her father with a smile. 'And this,' she said, reaching out and taking her mother's hand. "This is your grandmother."

"It's wonderful to meet you both," Ruwee said, holding out his hand to his grandchildren. Luke and Leia shook his hand. Their grandmother was a little more demonstrative and put her arms around each of them and hugged them tightly.

“We came to the house in Theed,” Anakin told them. “But there was no one there.”

“We left three months ago,” Ruwee explained as they all sat down again. “When we heard the rumors that Padmé Amidala had been spotted in the Senate Chambers on Coruscant. We didn’t know if it was true or not, but we decided it was worth investigating.”

“We’ve spent the past three months searching for you, Padmé,” Jobal told her. “We had all but given up hope.”

“Where have you been?” Ruwee asked. ‘I’m afraid I’m confused by all of this.’ He looked at Anakin. “You two are married with children, and more on the way, by the look of things,” he added, looking back at his obviously pregnant daughter. “Seems we’ve been kept in the dark for quite some time now.”

Padmé and Anakin looked at one another. “Well, it’s a long story,” Padmé said, not even sure where to begin.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning?” Jobal suggested. “We have a lot of time.”

Three months later...

Anakin helped Padmé as she walked up and down in the terrace. Her labor had started at dawn, and was not progressing nearly as quickly as she would have liked. Her mother suggested walking would speed things up, and Padmé was more than happy to take the suggestion.

“I don’t know if this is such a good idea,” Anakin said. “I think maybe you should be off your feet, Padmé.”

“I don’t want to spend the entire day in that bed,” Padmé told him. “These babies will never be born if I do that.”

Anakin nodded, realizing that she knew more about what was going on than he did. She had been through this before, he had not. Even though these were not his firstborn, he felt as though they were. He did not want to admit to Padmé how nervous he was, how much the thought of her in pain upset him. *She needs me to be strong, to support her... and that’s just what I’m going to do.*

“If you’re sure,” he said at last. ‘It’s just that....’ he stopped when he sensed that Padmé was experiencing another contraction. He wrapped his arms around her as she put her face against his chest. “Breathe, Padmé,” he told her, rubbing her back soothingly. “Breathe through it angel.”

Padmé nodded as she grasped at the folds of his tunic, eyes closed as she focused on the breathing techniques her sister and mother had shown her. Having Anakin with her made the ordeal so much more tolerable, and made her wonder how she endured the birth of Luke and Leia without him.

“Any progress?”

Anakin looked up to see his mother-in-law on the terrace.

“Hold on, Jobal,” he said as Padmé’s contraction petered out. “Cleansing breath, Padmé,” he reminded her.

Jobal watched her son-in-law, amazed by how supportive and loving his was. When she and Ruwee had learned of what had happened, of how he had spent five years as Darth Vader, they were horrified, and had wondered if they would ever be able to accept him. But it was obvious that the man he had become since being reunited with his family was nothing like the infamous Sith Lord who had terrorized the galaxy for five years. He was utterly devoted to his wife and children, a loving father and husband. Watching him interact with his family it was plain to see that his wife and children meant more to him than anything, even the Jedi Order that he was in the process of helping rebuild.

“They’re getting closer, aren’t they angel?” Anakin asked.

Padmé nodded her exhaustion showing on her face.

“Let’s get you off your feet for a little while,” Anakin said, putting his arm around her waist.

Jobal followed them indoors and into the bedroom where Padmé sat down on the rocking chair that her father had brought to the estate from Theed.

“Where are Luke and Leia?” Padmé asked.

“Your dad has them down at the beach with Sola’s girls,” Jobal told her. ‘Don’t worry about them,’ she said. “Darred is with them too.”

“Okay,” Padmé said, rocking in the chair slowly.

“Can I get you something to eat, Padmé?” Jobal asked. “You’re going to need your strength when it comes time to deliver these little ones.”

“Yes, that would be nice,” Padmé replied. “Something light, thanks Mom.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said, standing up and leaving the room.

Anakin paced up and down in the room, his anxiety not allowing him to sit still.

“Ani,” she said, “are you going to tell me yet?”

“Tell you what, angel?” he said, squatting down before her.

She smiled. “You know very well what,” she replied. “You know the gender of these babies, don’t you?”

Anakin smiled. “Maybe,” he replied. “You won’t have to wait much longer though, Padmé. Can’t you wait that long?”

Padmé laughed. “You are so mean,” she said. “So mean.”

“I am, I know,” he said with a smile. “You wouldn’t be in this position if it weren’t for me, right?”

“That’s right,” she said. She winced as another contraction hit, and she reached out for his hand.

“Breathe, that’s it,” Anakin encouraged. “You’re doing great, angel.”

Shmi Skywalker and her twin, Qui-Gon were born several hours later. The new Skywalker twins were greeted soon after their birth by their elder sister and brother, who were delighted to have a younger brother and sister.

The extended family of the infants was equally excited to welcome two new members into the family.

“Luke and Leia finally asleep?” Padmé asked as Anakin entered their bedroom.

He nodded as she came and sat on the bed, watching her as she nursed his new son. He leaned forward and kissed the tiny boy on the top of his head, his brown fuzzy hair soft under his lips. “I love the smell of them,” Anakin said, looking up at Padmé with a smile. “Does that sound crazy?”

She smiled back at him. “Not at all,” she said, looking down at Qui-Gon with adoration. “I do too.”

Just then little Shmi, who had been asleep in her bassinet, started to fuss. Anakin got up off the bed and walked over to the bassinet and picked up the tiny infant gently.

“Are you feeling left out?” he asked his new daughter. She looked up at him, soothed by the sound of his voice. He gently kissed the tip of her tiny nose. ‘Do you have any idea how many people love you?’ he asked little Shmi as he walked over to the bed with her. “I know if your namesake were here today she would be one of them,” he added, thinking of how much his mother would have adored her four grandchildren.

“Yes, she would have,” Padmé said, as she finished burping Qui-Gon. “Do you want to switch?”

“In a moment,” he replied, not able to tear his eyes away from little Shmi’s face.

Padmé watched Anakin bonding with his tiny daughter, the expression on his face one of wonder and utter adoration. It made her heart ache to think that he had missed the birth of their first two children. *But he has made up for it*, she reflecting on how strong the bond between Anakin and his two elder children was. And no doubt the bond with these two newest additions would be just as strong.

“I think she’s hungry,” Anakin said as Shmi started to fuss again. “And I’m not equipped to give her what she wants,” he added with a smile. Padmé laughed as she placed Qui-Gon in the crook of Anakin’s arm and picked Shmi up from the other arm.

“Feel better little one?” he asked his son as Shmi suckled hungrily at her mother’s breast.

Qui-Gon looked at his father, almost as though he could understand what he said. Anakin smiled and kissed the tiny boy tenderly. He looked at him and then up at Padmé. “I see now why you wanted to switch,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Padmé asked looking up at him with a smile. “Did he...relieve himself?”

Anakin laughed. “Yes, you could say so,” he said, carrying the baby to the change table. ‘I just hope I can remember how to do this,’ he muttered. “I’ve only done it once today.”

“Oh come on,” Padmé said. “A big, strong Jedi afraid of a little dirty diaper?”

“I’m not afraid,” he told her as he removed the sleeper from the baby. ‘I’m just....whoa...’ he said as he opened the diaper.” Impressive,’ he said, looking down at his son. “Most impressive.”

Padmé couldn’t help but laugh at Anakin’s antics. “Well get used to it, Daddy,” she said. “Two babies make a lot of diapers. Believe me.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I’m sure,” he said as he proceeded to clean the baby. “I’m sure I’ll be a pro in no time.”

“Yes, you will,” she said.

“How long before they’re potty trained?” he asked

“A year,” she said. “Maybe more.”

“Oh boy,” he said as he redressed the baby. ‘How about less?’ he said, addressing his son. “What do you say, Qui-Gon?”

Padmé shook her head as she watched Anakin pick up the baby and return to the bed. He sat down on the bed beside Padmé, his eyes never leaving the baby’s face. He rocked him gently as little Qui-Gon drifted off to sleep.

“You’re a natural,” she said softly.

Anakin smiled. “It feels natural,” he said. “If feels....incredible.”

Padmé smiled, and put her head on Anakin’s shoulder as Shmi drifted to sleep in her mother’s arms.

“Look, they’re both asleep,” Anakin whispered. Padmé made no reply. ‘Angel?’ he said, and then turned to look at her, and smiled to see that she too was asleep. “Good night, angels,” he said, nestling down on the bed and closing his eyes.

Chapter 62

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

"Happy Birthday Luke and Leia, happy birthday to you!"

"I get to wish first," Leia announced. "You wished first last year."

"Did not!" Luke protested. "You did! You *always* do!"

"I did not!! Mom, Luke is being bossy again!"

Padmé exchanged a look with Anakin who smiled.

"Somehow this argument sounds vaguely familiar," Padmé said. "And what do I tell you every year?"

"Make a wish at the same time," the twins responded in unison.

"Then do so!" Padmé replied.

"Just think, Padmé," Dormé told her. "You'll have to go through this *every* birthday from now on."

Padmé laughed. "Oh boy," she said. She looked at her younger daughter who was in Dormé's arms. "You and your brother aren't going to squabble on your birthday, are you Shmi?"

Shmi just waved her little fists in the air, giving her mother a smile in response.

"Of course she will," Obi-Wan said, looking at the baby boy in Anakin's arms. "She's a Skywalker, isn't she?"

"Hey, now what is *that* supposed to mean?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Only that you live to be... contrary," he replied.

Anakin laughed. "Well, not anymore. I have to set a good example now you know, being a father. And you'll have to do the same in a few months time," he added.

Obi-Wan nodded, looking at his wife who was expecting their first child in another five months. "Yes, I suppose so," he replied wistfully. "No more carousing, no more gambling," he joked, loving the expression on Dormé's face.

"That's right Obi-Wan," Anakin said, playing along with the joke. "No more exotic dancers, no more drinking..."

"You two are just awful," Jobal interjected, shaking her head as she placed a piece of birthday cake on the table in front of each of them. "And here I thought the Jedi were supposed to be so serious and contemplative."

“We’re serious, sometimes,” Anakin told her with a smile. “Aren’t we Obi-Wan?”

“Absolutely,” he concurred.

Anakin frowned and looked down at his son. “Well Obi-Wan, what do you say to some diaper changing practice?” he said.

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows. “Oh... well, I hardly think that is necessary,” he said.

“Oh yes it is,” Dormé said. “Go and learn, Master Jedi.”

“You heard the lady,” Anakin said, standing up with young Qui-Gon in his arms. “Come on.”

Obi-Wan stood up and followed Anakin out of the room and to the nursery.

“It’s easy,” Anakin said, demonstrating with remarkable ease how to change Qui-Gon’s diaper. Having changed more than a few in the past three months, he was now quite adept at it.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin closely. “You make it look so easy,” he muttered.

“Well it is easy,” Anakin replied. “It took me a few tries to get it right, but once I got the hang of it, I could do it in my sleep. I think I probably have, what with the two of them up feeding every three hours.”

“I can’t imagine,” Obi-Wan replied. “But Dormé isn’t carrying twins, so we won’t have quite the same challenges on our hands.”

“True,” Anakin said, picking up his son once again. “Have you told her the gender?”

“No, she doesn’t want to know,” he replied. “She wants it to be a surprise,” he added with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “Think you can keep it secret for another five months?”

“I think so,” he said. “Can you?” he added with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “I won’t tell a living soul that you are having a son,” he said. “Jedi’s honor.”

“Yes, well what about Padmé?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Well... uh... she already knows,” Anakin admitted sheepishly.

Obi-Wan laughed. “I knew it,” he said.

The two friends turned to leave the nursery and were surprised to see Qui-Gon Jinn standing before them.

“Qui-Gon!” Anakin said with a smile. “It’s good to see you.”

Qui-Gon smiled. “I’ve come just in time to see my young namesake awake I see,” he said, looking at the baby in Anakin’s arms. “Last time he was asleep as I recall.”

Anakin looked down at his infant son. “Yes, he was,” he replied. “He’s three months old now, Qui-Gon,” he said. “He’s awake more during the day now, and very curious.”

"A common trait among your children, I've noted," Obi-Wan remarked.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I think they come by that honestly," he said with a smile.

"No doubt of that," Qui-Gon agreed. He looked down into his namesake's face. The baby, who was able to see the Jedi even in the ethereal form he now assumed, looked back at him. 'He is already strong with the Force, Anakin,' Qui-Gon decided, smiling at the infant. "He will be a great Jedi one day, just like his father."

Anakin looked up at Qui-Gon and smiled. "Just like his namesake," he added.

Qui-Gon smiled. "I am very proud of you, Anakin," he said. "You have fulfilled the prophecy, and now you are rebuilding the Order."

"Almost single handedly," Obi-Wan added with a grin.

Qui-Gon chuckled. "Well, the Jedi population needs new blood," he said. "Anakin is doing is part to see that it gets it."

"And so are you, Obi-Wan," Anakin reminded him. "You just need to talk Dormé into having three more and we'll be even."

Obi-Wan laughed. "We'll see about that," he said.

"I will let you return to your families," Qui-Gon said. "A sixth birthday is a special one, and you don't want to miss any of it, I'm sure."

"Will you be in attendance at the Temple next week to see the new younglings Yoda has discovered?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes, I'll be there," Qui-Gon replied. "And I look forward to seeing your other three children soon as well," he told Anakin.

"Until then, Qui-Gon," Anakin said as the image of Qui-Gon Jinn faded away.

Anakin looked down at his son. "Shall we get back to the party?" he asked. Young Qui-Gon smiled at his father's words.

"I think so too," Anakin said with a smile. He looked up at Obi-Wan. "Coming?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Absolutely," he said. "Lead the way."

"I can't believe Luke and Leia are six years old," Padmé said as she climbed into bed with Anakin later that night.

Anakin pulled her into his arms. "I know," he said. "The past year has gone by so fast."

"But what an eventful year it has been," she said. "You know it was just the day after their fifth birthday that I learned the truth about you, that you were still alive."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, that's right. I shall never forget that day when you turned up on my ship with the twins. You were so brave to do that, Padmé. You had no idea what I was going to do."

"I knew that you would never harm your children," she told him. "And I knew that what had happened at Mustafar had been a terrible mistake, and that you would never harm me."

“You placed so much on the chance that there was still a human heart inside of me,” Anakin said in amazement. “I’m still in awe of your belief in me.”

Padmé smiled. “When you love someone as much as I love you, you never stop believing in them, even when everyone else does.”

Anakin took her face in his hands. “I am the luckiest man in the galaxy,” he said softly.

Padmé smiled at him. “I’m glad you think so,” she said as he pulled her close to kiss her.

THE END